

# he speaks from the cross

*John Sutherland Bonnell • J. Wallace Hamilton  
Gerald Kennedy • Robert J. McCracken • J.B. Phillips  
Paul Scherer • Chad Walsh*

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# he speaks from the cross

## THE SEVEN LAST WORDS

With penetrating personal significance, the words of Christ from Calvary resound afresh for today in this symposium of towering inspiration.

Articulately recorded for minister and layman alike, *He Speaks from the Cross* brings together the distinguished voices of seven internationally recognized Protestant spokesmen, each inimitably interpreting a segment of the Crucifixion's mighty message.

These are studies of the Saviour's Last Words singularly rich in illustration and contemporary insight. Throughout, these pages impressively demonstrate anew that Christ's life and teachings become truly understandable only in that light which never ceases to stream from His cross.

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# HE SPEAKS

# FROM THE CROSS

FLEMING H. REVELL COMPANY



HE  
SPEAKS  
FROM THE  
CROSS



FLEMING H. REVELL COMPANY



Whenever there is silence around me  
By day or by night—  
I am startled by a cry.  
It came down from the cross—  
The first time I heard it.  
I went out and searched—  
And found a man in the throes of crucifixion,  
And I said, "I will take you down,"  
And I tried to take the nails out of his feet.  
But he said, "Let them be  
For I cannot be taken down  
Until every man, every woman, and every child  
Come together to take me down."  
And I said, "But I cannot hear you cry.  
What can I do?"  
And he said, "Go about the world—  
Tell everyone that you meet—  
There is a man on the cross."

*"There Is a Man on the Cross"*  
*by Elizabeth Cheney*



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THE **1<sup>st</sup>** WORD

*Father, forgive them; for  
they know not what  
they do.*

LUKE 23:34

## J. Wallace Hamilton

THERE WAS A MAN WHO STOOD CLOSE TO THE CROSS THAT DAY and spoke the words of Christian belief. He was a most unlikely theologian—a heathen, a soldier, a captain of the Roman Guard. You can almost see him there, a uniformed officer of Roman justice performing his grim duty and watching the final agonies of the gruesome business with eyes accustomed to violence and death. He stood in the semidarkness muttering something under his breath. Somebody heard it and remembered. He was speaking a Name, a high and holy Name. Likely he did not mean what we mean by it. Perhaps in his dark, pagan mind it was only superstitious awe. But he was in a position to see, as perhaps no other witness in the episode, that this was no ordinary day and no ordinary death.

The Man on the cross had been his prisoner. It had been his duty to guard Him through the ordeals of the day. It was he who had marched Him in early morning, first to Pilate, then to Herod, then back to Pilate again. He had heard the confusing conversation between Him and Pilate about truth and power and kingdoms not of this world. It was his word of command that had begun the grim procession up the hill to the place of a skull. He had often seen

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men die; that was his business—crucifixions, sometimes one, sometimes two, this day three. He was not a dainty man. But all day long he had seen something new in power and courage and self-control. And as he watched Him breathe out His last deep sigh, he said, “Truly this was the Son of God” (Matthew 27:54).

We must not read our thoughts into his words. We don’t know what he meant. It may have been only superstition, or a soldier’s admiration for courage, something in the dignity of His dying that impressed him. We have people still who see little more in the cross than courage. In the play, *Will Shakespeare*, Queen Elizabeth is made to say:\*

... I’ll not bow  
To the gentle Jesus of the woman, I . . . ,  
But to the man who hung ’twixt earth and heaven  
Six mortal hours, and knew the end (as strength  
And custom was) three days away, yet ruled  
His soul and body so, that when the sponge  
Blessed His cracked lips with promise of relief  
And quick oblivion, He would not drink,  
He turned His head away and would not drink,  
Spat out the anodyne and would not drink;  
This was a God for kings and queens with pride,  
And Him I follow.

So I say it may not have been more that the centurion meant in his mumblings—a salute to the brave, “the attrac-

\* Clemence Dane.



tion of a man of metal to the magnet of incomparable courage." Nevertheless, we can't get anywhere in the understanding of the cross until we see clearly what the soldier saw dimly: "Truly this was the Son of God." No ordinary dying, not merely another man dying for another cause. There was something beyond man in this Man; God speaking, telling us something about Himself, something more divine than any miracle.

We are to think now about the first words from the cross, one of seven last words recorded in the Gospels: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"—a prayer—a death cry—ten words. What was there in them that stirred a soldier's wonder long ago, and the wonder of men in every generation since? We're not implying that in our thought of these words we can comprehend them. It is part of the miracle and majesty of the cross that we can never measure it with our human yardsticks or sound its depths with our little logics. We can only modestly hope that in our meditation we may hear again the confirmation of the Christian conviction, that "... God was in Christ, reconciling the world. . . ." (II Corinthians 5:19). God was in Christ! God was in the deed! God was in the words!

See the words in their accurate insight. "... forgive them; for they know not what they do." When H. A. Overstreet was preparing to write his illuminating book *The Mature Mind*, he said that this prayer by Jesus for those who put Him on the cross is one of the most mature words ever

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spoken. This insight of His, that the evil men do is the evil of their ignorance, is a sound expression of reality. It is not merely a charitable speech offering kind excuses for human behavior, but an accurate judgment of human nature. In all sin there is an element of ignorance. Men do terrible things in this world, to themselves and to each other, because they do not know what they do.

How deep and dark is the ignorance of man; much of it is quite forgivable because it is constitutional. That is, it rises out of the normal limitations of the finite mind. How can finite man comprehend infinite reality? How little he knows in a world of stubborn mysteries. He walks a narrow path between birth and death, one small tick of the cosmic clock, ignorant of the world around him, of the world within him, and most of all of the world above him. He prides himself in his knowledge and is often arrogant in his ignorance. But what he does not know is his great burden, and also his great challenge.

Never was a proverb more foolish: "What you don't know won't hurt you." The reverse is true. What we don't know keeps multiplying crosses in the earth. What we haven't yet learned hurts us (the cause and cure for cancer, for illustration); what we have mislearned hurts us; what we have learned and, by our stupidity misused, hurts us. It would be difficult to measure the enormity of sin and suffering that is rooted in man's ignorance. "... there was darkness over all the earth . . ." (Luke 23:44). What a fitting

word that is, as though all nature and creation were involved in that hour of conflict.

The cross is not only an event in history. It is history itself, focused in a moment of time, the eternal sign and symbol of a continuing conflict—God's long, patient, agonizing struggle to break through the barriers of man's amazing dullness, not only the dullness of the mind but the deeper darkness of the heart. "They know not what they do."

Of course it doesn't mean they didn't know they were killing a man. In some areas of his life man is not ignorant. In one skill his knowledge is most highly developed, the skill to kill. What they didn't know, in their moral ignorance was the deeper meaning of the deed. Someone said that the moral mood of modern man is, "Father, forgive me; for I don't know what I am doing, and please don't tell me." That was the sin of Old Jerusalem: moral blindness making crosses. And that is the history of man, for century after century in monotonous repetition—martyrs, prophets and pioneers, vilified, misunderstood and crucified by the ignorant men they labored to redeem.

◁ We don't have to agree wholly with George Bernard Shaw who lamented that humanity crucifies its best men and glorifies its worst. But it is a matter of historical fact that in every field of moral, spiritual and even intellectual advancement, mankind has idolized warriors who taught men to kill, and penalized saviours who taught men to love. That

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is why, even now, with all our boasted enlightenment, we are still morally ignorant. We still spend more mind and money on killing or preparing to kill than we do to bring the light of God into the dark world. >

Thomas Huxley said, "I know of no story so utterly saddening as the story of man's slow progress in the realm of ideals. Man is a recalcitrant brute. He makes it a point of killing and persecuting all who first try to get him to move, and when he has moved he foolishly confers post-mortem deification on his victims, and then proceeds to exactly repeat the process with all who want to move him a step yet further."

Ignorance making crosses! That is the history of man, and the cross can never be an isolated moment in history, however unique and sublime. The cross is an accurate insight into the nature of man and the meaning of history, the vivid revelation of a continuing conflict wherever light contends with darkness and the holiness of God comes down to meet the sinfulness of man. Something more divine than any miracle was His accurate insight into life.

"Father, forgive them . . ." is an unexpected miracle, a prayer for healing. I wonder whether, with our short reach, we can ever know how high and holy is that death cry. This is not the manner of men. We have to remember that executions were public spectacles and crucifixion was the most horrible and degrading death, designed not only to kill but to humiliate. Roman citizens were never crucified. That

special torture was reserved for slaves and alien criminals and scoundrels—scum. Jesus was numbered not only among the lowly, but among the lowest of the low, with a thief on either side. “And he was numbered with the transgressors” (Mark 15:28).

And that is what shook the centurion—an unexpected miracle. A curse from the cross he would have understood, a cry for mercy or for the sweet relief of death—that would be human. But that a Man in the torture of a crucifixion should forget Himself and pray for them—this was not the manner of men.

It was that same thought that haunted the hearts of Jesus’ own disciples. They could never forget the wonder of it. Forty years later, Peter wrote his impressions of the cross, and what went down deepest and lingered longest was the memory of a Man who, when He was reviled, reviled not again but bore the sin of it in His body.

The Apostle Paul tells us frankly that he could never fathom the depth of it. If men had been winsome, worthy, lovable, Jesus’ prayer might in some measure be explained. But that Christ could forgive His enemies, pray for and die for His enemies—this was not the manner of men. “In human experience,” Paul said, as J. B. Phillips translates him, “it is a rare thing for one man to give his life for another, even if the latter be a good man, though there have been a few who have had the courage to do it. Yet the proof of God’s amazing love is this: that it was *while we were sin-*

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*ners* that Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8, PHILLIPS). Why should Jesus act like that? Judged by all human standards, there was no reason why He should.

For years Paul brooded over the mystery of the cross, wrapped his powerful mind around its meaning, saw it as the saving law of life, a new dimension in love. It was something more than reciprocated kindness, fondness for a friend, good will to good people. It was something higher than human beings, holier than the law, the linking of two words up to now incompatible—"love" and "enemy." Love is what you feel for a friend. An enemy is one for whom you feel contempt, whose evil you resist, whose hand is against your hand. But on the cross we learn a new semantics, words blended which heretofore had never been joined together.

For this reason it is a mistake to think of the cross as a defeat which had to be corrected later by the resurrection. The cross itself was victory, the miracle of One who, even by the blackest crime, could not be pushed into sin; the triumph of love that could not be broken down, that could still believe in man even when the best in him had been defeated and the worst in him had taken over. This is not the manner of men.

Go search for parallels. There are none. There are parables here and there, faint reflections in human lives which only accentuate the miracle. When Mahatma Gandhi was shot by a fanatical assassin, he put up his hand in the Hindu gesture of forgiveness. It was quite a tribute to the

little man of India. So much had forgiveness become habitual in his spirit that even when he was caught off-guard with a bullet in his body, his last conscious act was to forgive the man who took his life. But Mr. Gandhi often acknowledged that he had acquired that quality of forgiveness, along with many other gifts, from Him who, from a cross, said, "Father, forgive. . . ."

When Martin Niemöller was in a Nazi concentration camp, as Hitler's special prisoner, he pondered these words of Jesus. Day after day he watched his prison guards and wondered. He had been one of a number of political prisoners, so many that his small son once asked Frau Niemöller, "Mommy, are there bad people in prisons too?" When Martin Niemöller was in Silver Bay, N. Y., some years ago, he told us about the struggle that had gone on within himself during eight years of imprisonment. He said he had reason to be grateful that he was not set free in less time because it was during the last part of his confinement that he came to learn forgiveness.

Outside his small cell window at Dachau the gallows had been set up. He could see it, day after day, when other prisoners were put to death. He could hear their curses and their prayers. "That gallows," he said, "became my most reliable teacher. There were always two questions in my mind: What will happen on the day they lead you there and put you to the test? When they put that rope around your neck, what will be your last words? Will you, then,

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cry out, 'You criminals, scum! There's a God in heaven! You'll get yours!?' And the other question was, What would have happened if Jesus had said it, if He had taken his last breath to cry out to the soldiers and the Sanhedrin, 'Criminals! Scum! This is my Father's world. You'll get yours!?' What would have happened? Nothing! One more poor sinner would have died there, lonely and forgotten, and nothing would have happened."

⤵ If Jesus had cried out in vengeance, or even in justice, on His enemies, there would be no gospel, no New Testament, no church, no Christian history. We would never have heard His name. "Father, forgive. . . ." That prayer is the miracle. That prayer gave us a gospel. ⤵ And Martin Niemöller went on to say, "It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. He is not even the enemy of His enemies."

Here on a hill God is still fighting His enemies, but He is doing it His way, not ours. He is fighting them by forgiving them, saving them by loving them. They cried out, "Save yourself. Give us a sign from heaven. Come down. Let us see a miracle to prove it." And He gave them an unexpected miracle: "Father, forgive . . ."—more divine than any miracle, more powerful than any sign from heaven.

So that forever since in the minds of men,  
By some true instinct has this life survived,  
Preeminent in one thing most of all—

The Cross of Christ is more to us than all His miracles.

*"The Galilean," by Nathaniel Micklen*



How do we explain the melancholy attraction of Jesus, the strange, abiding persistence of the cross? “. . . if I be lifted up, . . . [I] will draw all men unto me” (John 12:32). How could He ever say that or even think it? It is against all human logic that a cross should ever be the symbol of faith, that the spectacle of One executed as a criminal should become the focal point of worship, that two thousand years after the event men and women of reasonable intelligence should sing:

In the cross of Christ I glory,  
Towering o'er the wrecks of time.

*John Bowring*

For those who still seek a sign from heaven, here is one—the magnetism of Christ, the luminous appeal of the cross, the hold of Christ on the human heart.

To be sure, there are not a few who regretfully believe that His was wasted suffering, that love is a helpless force against the might of power, that it can win no victories except moral victories. Some believe, as Francois Mauriac lamented, that the saints of the world can expect no other fate and can have no other reward than to be killed and persecuted by the poor, sinning creatures they love—on and on. I wonder! “. . . If I be lifted up, . . . [I] will draw. . . .” Nothing else has changed the human heart so deeply as this deed on a hill. Nothing else has made men feel so strongly that we are being pursued by a love that will never give up and never let go until we bow our knees at last.

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Charles Rand Kennedy wrote a play about the centurion, and called it *The Terrible Meek*. He put Mary, Jesus' mother, and the mail-clad centurion on this hillside in the darkness of the night, and through their vivid dialogue Kennedy dramatized the world's dilemma which is now coming to a kind of crisis in history, the weakness of so much which we have relied upon as strength and the strength of so much which, in our ignorance, we have scorned as weakness. "He is alive," said the centurion to Mary. And she said, "Why do you mock me? Are you God that you can kill and make alive in one breath?" "He's alive, woman, I tell you. I can't kill Him. All the empires can't kill Him. How shall hate destroy the power that possesses and rules the earth?"

There are times when we almost understand. The veil between God and man is very thin, and there are moments when we see through it and know—moments when we know that love is the only omnipotence there is. It is a power that draws, not drives, and it is more mighty than all the missiles and massed armies in the earth.

More divine than any miracle is the grip of Christ on the souls of men. Why does He hold our hearts so strangely, still? What is there in that lonely Man dying in the dark, praying for His enemies, that spans the generations with a strong, magnetic power to make us feel as the Roman soldier felt, that we are being silently judged by Him, that this dying on a hill was an act of God that involves and includes us all, and that in a death cry of His deepest debasement we can hear:

THE  
1st WORD

The sound of invisible trumpets blowing  
Round two slabs of wood, right-angled, hammered  
By Roman nails and hung on a Jewish hill.

*E. J. Pratt\**

\* *Collected Poems*, St. Martin's Press, Inc.



THE *2<sup>nd</sup>* WORD

Verily I say unto thee,  
To day shalt thou be  
with me in paradise.

LUKE 23:43

THE *2<sup>nd</sup>* WORD

John Sutherland Bonnell

SO FAMILIAR HAS THE LIFE OF CHRIST BECOME TO MOST Christians that its uniqueness is often dimmed. What would have been our reaction, I wonder, if we had come upon one of the gospels without any previous knowledge of His wondrous Life? For one thing, we should have been deeply impressed, I am sure, by the strange disproportion of space given to the circumstances surrounding the death of Jesus.

When John Morley wrote the *Life of William Ewart Gladstone*, it was published in three volumes, each one containing between twelve hundred and fourteen hundred pages. Yet Morley devoted only two pages to the British statesman's death. A biographer of George Washington discussed his death in one brief paragraph. G. F. Barbour, in a 650-page biography of Alexander Whyte, referred to the death of the noted Scottish preacher in only one sentence: "Before the winter dawn had come, or the great city had awakened to another day of action, his spirit had left its earthly home untenanted."\*

Now, when we turn to the Gospel of St. John, we are surprised to discover that of its twenty-one chapters, no less

\* *The Life of Alexander Whyte.*

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than ten deal with the last week of Jesus' life and to the events surrounding His death. In the gospels of the other three evangelists, also, the central emphasis is directed to our Lord's crucifixion. In no instance, however, do they dissociate Jesus' life and ministry from the denouement on Calvary. Indeed, His life and teachings become truly understandable only in the light that never ceases to stream from His cross.

On a hilltop high above the Bavarian village of Oberammergau, where the Passion Play is presented each decade, towers a cross. It is the focal point of all that greets the eye of the traveler as he enters the little community. It dominates the landscape and appears to fill the horizon.

Even so, the cross of Christ has become the central point in human history. It has drawn the eyes of all generations to His marred visage. It is the one luminous spot in the universe. It compels the adoring wonder of all men. The French scholar and skeptic, Ernest Renan, came under its spell as he wrote his *Vie de Jésus*. When, in his narrative, he comes to the crucifixion he is brought up short. Looking up into the sorrow-riven face of the Saviour of men, he utters these words of passionate recognition: "Thou art destined to become the cornerstone of the human race in such wise that to tear thy name from the world would shake it to its foundation."

The power of the cross has never diminished. Down through all the centuries it has unceasingly overshadowed



men and events. Yet there is spiritual peril in the observance of Lent and Good Friday. All too readily we regard the chief actors in this terrible drama as monsters of iniquity. We vent our condemnation on Judas and Caiaphas, Herod and Pilate, and thereby experience a glow of virtuous satisfaction. But they were not abysmally wicked men who crucified Christ. They were men like unto ourselves, each with his private virtues. Each of them was able to rationalize his conduct and to justify, at least to his own satisfaction, what he had done.

As we walk along the shore of a lake on a moonlit night, the moonbeams cast silver pathways directly to our feet. Likewise, if we look at the cross of Christ with sensitive minds and hearts, we become aware of our personal involvement. Studying the faces of those who stand around the cross, we suddenly realize that they are our contemporaries—people whom we might meet any day on the streets of New York or London, Paris or Rome. Indeed we may see in their features some of the lineaments of our own faces.

If we celebrate Good Friday by thanking God because we are not like the men who crucified Christ, we are guilty of spiritual pride. The world has reached its present impasse because the same evil passions that drove Christ to the cross are alive and active in the hearts of modern men and women. Among the guilty ones nineteen hundred years ago were such as these: temple merchants full of hate and fury because our Lord drove them and their illicit traffic from the

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temple which they had made "a den of thieves"; wily churchmen with their clever rationalizations that one man must die for the people; politicians declaring that they assumed no responsibility for the death of Christ since that was the people's choice; common folk, with vacant faces and empty hearts, dancing in fury like marionettes while hidden hands pulled the strings; Roman soldiers, brutalized by constant warfare, rattling dice in their brass helmets as they gambled for Jesus' robe. It would seem that every segment of society was represented by the men who crucified our Lord. In the cross of Calvary the pride, selfishness, lusts, fears and the hates which have their dwelling in human hearts are exhibited for all men to see.

The cross is God's way of revealing us to ourselves. There, as nowhere else, we see the awful gulf that yawns between what we are and what God meant us to be.

Modern Christians have become so accustomed to the cross that we forget how horrible and repellent the instrument of execution actually was. We build churches in the form of a cross. We set up crosses on spires and on altars. Gem-studded crosses are worn as adornments. Modern crosses, large or small, are works of art, chaste, symmetrical, beautiful. But there was nothing beautiful in the cross that stood on Calvary. It was an upright piece of hewn timber with a crossbeam wide enough for a man's outstretched hands to be nailed upon it. Cicero declares that crucifixion was the most horrible death known to the Romans and that

it must never be inflicted on the body of a citizen of the Empire.

As we lift up our eyes to that cross in the spirit of humility and penitence and see its unspeakable shame, its agony of spirit, its blasphemy and torture, its nakedness and death, we are smitten by a realization of the enormity of human sin that delivered God's own Son to such a death. With a sudden shock we realize that the crucifixion of Christ was not an event in the far distant past with no relevance to our contemporary situation. Look where you will today—business and industrial life, at chambers of commerce and labor unions, at courts of justice and law-enforcement officials, at international peace assemblies and ecclesiastical councils, or simply at the relationships of man with man—and you will discover that life is one long conflict between the motives that actuated Jesus and the forces that nailed Him to the cross. We too, like those who stood beside the cross nineteen hundred years ago, are choosing sides. We too were there “when they crucified our Lord.”

The inner meaning of the cross is revealed to us with special clarity when we observe what happened between Jesus and the hardened criminals who died on each side of Him. In the infinite wisdom of God, it came about that our Lord should be crucified between two thieves. While the multitude on the mountainside watched with bated breath the successive stages of the execution which sinful human passions had made inevitable, another drama was being

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enacted which only those close to the cross could see. The love of God was striving to win the souls of the two thieves who hung on their separate crosses, the one on the right hand and the other on the left of Jesus.

The men were, in all probability, comrades in crime who had shared common dangers and adventures. They were fierce, cruel, brutalized men who had often lain in wait for some unsuspecting traveler on the highways of Judea or Galilee. Having robbed and perhaps slain their victim, they divided the spoils. They had nothing but contempt for justice and righteousness. When at last the robbers fell into the hands of the Romans and were sentenced to death by crucifixion, they resolved that they would not gratify their captors with the slightest evidence of weakness.

On the central cross they saw the third victim of human justice and His gentleness called forth their scorn. So they joined with the mob in hurling taunts and jeers at His defenseless head. Suddenly the attention of one of the robbers is arrested. From the crowd standing near the cross he has caught scraps of gossip which indicated that this is no ordinary man. His is not the face of a criminal. The outlaw becomes convinced that Jesus is innocent of any crime. In spite of all the indignities He is suffering, no word of protest falls from His lips. Only love and compassion is reflected in His face.

Just as the thief is about to shout a term of contempt at our Lord, he stops abruptly, the words frozen on his lips.

He sees that the Master's eyes are closed in prayer. From a heart riven with grief and pain comes this cry, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

I believe that there is a definite relationship between the words of our Lord and the transformation wrought in an outlaw's heart. Is it too hard to believe that a prayer of ten words could break a heart as hard as flint and open a way to heaven from the very gates of hell? So near to Jesus was the thief that he could see lines of anguish on the Master's face and trace the rivulets made by the blood that flowed down from the thorns encircling His brow. In one moment of time the whole futile life of the brigand passed before his eyes. He saw the futility, the shame, the wickedness of it, as never before. The prayer of Jesus broke his heart.

Robert Browning, in "The Ring and the Book," tells of a pitch-dark night in Naples when ". . . the night's black was burst through by a blaze." One flash of lightning revealed the surrounding mountains, the city thick with spires, and the sea white as a ghost. "So," says the poet, "truth may be flashed out by one blow," and in that instant the despairing soul may see and be saved.

Thus it was with the thief on the cross who only a few minutes earlier had joined his voice to the curses and imprecations that were heaped upon Jesus. Overwhelmed with penitence, he implores God's mercy on his sinful life.

It was a clear vision of the inner meaning of Christ's cross that wrought within this criminal "a broken and a contrite

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heart." He saw the exceeding sinfulness of sin and realized that his own sin was a part of the burden that our Lord had to bear. So he who had openly sided with the enemies of Jesus now becomes His defender. Addressing his companions in crime, he says, "Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art in the same condemnation? And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds: but this man hath done nothing amiss" (Luke 23:41).

Here is the plain evidence of true repentance: acknowledgement of the justice of the punishment that sin brings on itself. The other thief had said, "If thou be Christ, save thyself and us" (Luke 23:39). He could discern no difference between the holy life of Jesus and his own wicked career. He felt no contrition for all his misdeeds. His only concern was to escape the penalty of his wrongdoing.

During a preaching mission which I conducted in a large penitentiary, forty men sought a personal interview. At least two out of every five pleaded the injustice of the sentence they had been given and asked, "Will you intercede with the Justice Department and see if I can get a reprieve?"

The penitent thief said, ". . . we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds. . . ." He did not ask that he be delivered from the sufferings of the cross. He accepted the torture and anguish without complaint; indeed he would not have one pang less. He bared his breast, as it were, to the knife and pleaded that there be no sparing of the pain. His past life, marred and stained by sin, was cruci-

fied on the cross and the billows of agony that surged over him became cleansing streams that washed away his defilement. He was in process of being born again.

Our awareness of the cross of Christ unfailingly touches with solemnizing power the heart of man. Whenever a preacher reads the story of the crucifixion with sincerity and feeling, a hush falls over the congregation as though everyone present were touched by a strange and mystic spell. It is not otherwise with great paintings on this theme.

Some years since a group of American professors, authors and clergymen visited Russia's greatest art gallery, the Hermitage, in Leningrad. Preceding them was a contingent of workers and peasants conducted by a guide. Since they would shortly see a considerable number of religious paintings, the guide explained to the group that the government treasured the works of art solely because of their artistic merit, even though, as he said, religion is the opium of the people. Christ too, he said, favored the exploiters.

Suddenly the crowd came face to face with Rembrandt's justly famous painting "The Descent From the Cross." Every man stopped still before this masterpiece that depicts the body of Jesus being lowered from the cross. The group stood in complete silence as they gazed at the painting. One could almost read their thoughts. "If this Man on the cross were an exploiter, why did these rulers of the people wish to kill Him? Wouldn't they have welcomed Him to their number instead of destroying Him? Besides

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there is compassion on His face even in death. Certainly He didn't look like an oppressor. His hands, too, are calloused like ours. Why of course, for He was a carpenter. And what gain did He make at the expense of the people? He has nothing at all except these poor bits of clothing He wears. Above all else there is a Godlike expression on His face."

A look of comprehension came into the eyes of the foremost workman and he lifted his hand and pulled off his grimy cap. Instantly, almost every other head was bared. They experienced the compelling power of the uplifted Lord who said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32).

So the penitent thief, with the uplifted Lord directly before his eyes, cried out in sorrow and penitence, "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom" (Luke 23:42). In that moment a complete separation took place between the sinner and his sins. The pure flame of his devotion to Christ consumed his unworthiness and his past deeds of infamy were forgotten. The penitent thief without a friend in the world saw redemption in the eyes of Christ.

Here then is the first great lesson taught us by the cross of Jesus Christ—the exceeding sinfulness of the heart of man and his need of forgiveness and salvation. The second notable truth brought home to us by the cross of Christ is the wonder and reality of divine forgiveness—a revelation of the boundless love of God.



What is the meaning of those mysterious words written in the thirteenth chapter of Revelation: "... the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (v. 8)? What can they mean if not that the cross that was lifted up on Calvary was an outer symbol of the inner cross that has lain on the heart of God ever since man defiled the world with his rebellion and sin? Calvary of nineteen centuries ago was an expression in history of what has been, from all eternity, in the heart of God—forthgoing, unfathomable love. In the cross of Christ, God's eternal purpose and His heart of love are unveiled.

Dr. Ingram Bishop of London perceived this truth when he said, from the pulpit of Westminster Abbey, "The cross belongs to eternity rather than to time and with awful significance stretches with easy and terrible reach not only to the last moment that shall pass on earth but back to the earliest dawn of the foundation of the world."

Yes, Paul had the truth of it when he wrote: "... God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself . . ." (II Corinthians 5:19). This divine purpose is fully revealed in the conversion of the penitent thief. As our Lord's sufferings on the cross continued through the long hours of that first Good Friday, He made no response to the taunts of the religious leaders who dared Him to come down from the cross. He made no protest against the coarse cruelty of the Roman soldiers or the jeering of the rabble gathered from the streets of Jerusalem. No single sign did He give that

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He had heard the impenitent thief say, "If thou be the Christ, save thyself and us" (Luke 23:39). But no sooner did the cry of contrition come from the lips of the penitent outlaw, "Lord, remember me . . .," than He, who had appeared deaf to all other appeals, with a look of infinite compassion answered, "Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

In the moment of his seeming defeat, and by the aid of Christ, the penitent thief came off "more than conqueror." Redemptive love flowed through him not when he denied his guilt, but as he freely acknowledged the justice of the punishment meted out to him.

◀ Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his powerful novel *The Scarlet Letter*, tells of a Massachusetts clergyman who had grievously sinned. He permitted the young woman who was his companion in adultery to bear alone the shame. Though this minister, Dimmesdale, was loved and honored by his people, he did not know another moment of peace. Day and night he was tormented by an unrelenting conscience.

When the woman's hateful husband came to the town and learned Dimmesdale's guilty secret, he proceeded to stretch him daily upon the rack of mental torture. The youthful minister at last saw that there was only one road to peace with his conscience and with God—the road of full confession and repentance.

As Dimmesdale mounted the platform to confess to the townspeople his shameful wrongdoing, his enemy cried

out, "In all the world there was no place so secret; no high place nor lowly place where thou could'st have escaped me save this scaffold." Dimmesdale, like the penitent thief, found deliverance and redemption as he acknowledged the justice of God's judgment on his sin and called on Christ for forgiveness.

Not only was the thief on the cross assured of forgiveness; he was promised reunion with his Saviour on the other side of death. Oftentimes when the question is raised,—Will we recognize our loved ones in the world to come? we are likely to overlook the powerful evidence for the affirmative in this contact of the penitent thief with Jesus. Many notable Christian scholars and ministers have declared their belief that consciousness, memory, character and personal identity will live on. Surely, the testimony of Luke's Gospel substantiates this hope. Said our Lord to the penitent highwayman, "To day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

Think for a moment how this promise, given with divine authority, must have altered the thief's feelings about death. It removed all disquieting fears. It made his failing heart leap with joy. Now he knows that he has found a Friend who will meet him and welcome him into the heavenly kingdom and appoint him a place in his Father's house on high.

Dante, in his *Divine Comedy*, tells of his journey into the world of the unseen. He was guided to those spirits who, like the penitent thief, had been sinners up to the last

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moments of their lives. But, heeding the warning of heaven, they had repented and were forgiven. In the poet's words, they "did issue out of life at peace with God." Among them, Dante is surprised to see one Buonconte who, while he lived on earth, had been sensuous, rebellious and vile. How came he to be among those who journey on to the vision of God? Buonconte answers that, stricken in battle, he had fled away, leaving on the plain a gory trail from a gaping wound in his throat. As he lay dying, the minions of Hell came swooping down to bear him away but, swifter than thought, God's angels had also come and stood on guard. The two forces debated for possession of his soul. So black was Buonconte's record that he believed himself forever lost. But just as the demons were claiming him for their own, an angel pointed to his eyelids, weighed down in the last long sleep, where hanging from their fringe was "one poor tear." It was a token of repentance. At the last moment he had turned his face to God. Triumphant the angels bore him to the realms of the redeemed.

It was not just "one poor tear" which the outlaw on the cross had to offer Christ, but an entire life flung on the mercy of God which is in Christ Jesus. For you and me also there is no other place of refuge. No soul will ever enter the Kingdom of God save through the gateway of repentance.

Let us take another look at the three crosses on Golgotha. It is growing dark on Calvary. You can scarcely see the cross starkly outlined against the sky. What is the meaning

of that awful cry? Let us draw near. The taunts and jeers are hushed. There is no use reviling the Galilean; He no longer hears. His head has fallen forward on His breast. He is dead. But the two thieves are still alive. Sturdy fellows these, to suffer so long. Here come the Roman soldiers to break their bones.

Look at that dying thief! His eyes are fixed on the face of Christ. He does not see the soldiers. He does not seem to know that death is near. What sickening blows these Romans strike! He is almost gone. What is that the man is saying? "... today ... in paradise ... with Him."



THE **3<sup>rd</sup>** WORD

*Woman, behold thy son! . . .*

*Behold thy mother!*

JOHN 19:26-27



THE 3<sup>rd</sup>  
WORD

Robert J. McCracken

JESUS ON THE CROSS WAS NOT A HAPLESS VICTIM. TO AROUSE compassion preachers sometimes picture Him in His last agony as an almost effeminate sufferer, sensitive and shrinking in disposition, totally averse to conflict, submitting Himself passively to the indignities heaped on Him. It is a conception that was given life by Charles Swinburne

Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean,  
the world has grown grey from thy breath.  
*"Hymn to Proserpine"*

That is a travesty of the Jesus of the Gospels. All through His life, and supremely in His last hours, He bore Himself like a conqueror. His first word from the cross was a prayer for His murderers. His second word brought assurance and comfort to a dying thief. His third, an unutterably tender bequest representing a Jewish form of adoption, made provision for His mother.

Why didn't some friend of Mary prevent her from going to Golgotha? Surely she should have been spared the sight of her Son's crucifixion. Doubtless not one friend but many sought to prevail on her to stay far from the scene. Their appeals and entreaties were a waste of breath. Her mind

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was made up and nothing could shake or alter her resolution. To the last she would be as near to her Son as she could be. The lines of Rudyard Kipling come to mind:\*

If I were hanged on the highest hill, . . .  
I know whose love would follow me still, . . .  
If I were drowned in the deepest sea, . . .  
I know whose tears would come down to me, . . .  
If I were damned o' body and soul,  
I know whose prayers would make me whole,  
Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!

With Mary at Golgotha were three other women—her sister, Salome, the mother of the beloved disciple; Mary, the wife of Cleophas (according to tradition Cleophas was the brother of Joseph); and Mary Magdalene. With the exception of the beloved disciple, there apparently was not another male disciple near the cross—a fact for every man to ponder. Who first put into currency the saying that women are the weaker sex, and on what grounds? The weaker sex! A man in suffering is sometimes a child and often a baby; a woman, called upon to suffer, can be almost superhuman in strength. Maarten Maartens, the Dutch novelist, wrote to a friend: "Look at my wife—always racked by rheumatism in the head, always bright. Women can do that sort of thing. Had Job been a woman there would have been no Book of Job for she would simply

\* "*Mother o' Mine*"

have sat down in the muckheap and said, 'How good God is!' ”\*

One commentator, accounting for the presence of the four women at Golgotha and by indirection for the absence of all the disciples save one, says that it was “politically safe for them to be there; no one ever bothered about women.”† Political considerations or no political considerations, it would have been difficult to keep those four women away. Peter might take to his heels but not they. What did they care for the jeering multitude? What were the Roman soldiers to them? Theirs was a love loyal to death, even the death of the cross.

Central in the group of four was Mary of Nazareth. From the fear of Mariolatry, Protestants for the most part say too little about her. I cannot myself recall ever having heard a sermon about the woman who, of all the women in the world, was chosen to be the mother of the Redeemer of the world. We do well to remember the message addressed to her: “Hail, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” (Luke 1:28, rsv). She must have had exceptional qualities of heart and spirit, but if her privilege was unique, so too was her responsibility. To her was entrusted the task of rearing Jesus from infancy through childhood into young manhood. She taught Him His first lessons about God and

\* T. H. Darlow, *Life and Letters of William R. Nicoll* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925), p. 171.

† Leslie Paul, *Son of Man* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1961), p. 250.

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man and life and duty. She coached Him in His first prayers and opened to Him the Scriptures. That her influence on His growing mind was formative goes without saying. Attention has often been directed to the fact that sentiments embodied in the Magnificat echo again and again in the teaching of Jesus.

There is another side to the story, the side stressed in the Gospels. After the visit to the temple in Jerusalem, when He was twelve, Jesus returned with Joseph and Mary to Nazareth and "was subject unto them" (Luke 2:51). Dutiful though He was, Mary often had occasion to ponder in her heart the striking statement addressed to her by Him in the temple, "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49). While there was much about His vocation she did know, there was so much more that she did not know. As the years passed He became increasingly a mystery to her. Obedience gave way to independence, family obligation became subservient to the claims of the Kingdom of God. When Mary ventured a suggestion at the wedding in Cana of Galilee, what did she make of Jesus' rejoinder? "... Woman, what have you to do with me? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4, RSV). Once when she and His brothers were apprehensive about Him and the course His ministry was taking, and word was passed to Him that they wished to speak with Him, He looked round on the disciples and said, "Behold my Mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the

will of my Father, . . . the same is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Matthew 12:49-50). To some people, particularly in the East where family ties are strong, those words have a harsh sound. As she pondered them in her heart, what did Mary make of them?

Even more we ask, What did she make of Golgotha? Her Son nailed to a gibbet, executed as a common criminal! All around her a hooting, jeering mob! Who can begin to describe the emotions surging in Mary's breast? Uppermost there must have been identification with His suffering. When a son is in agony of body and mind, what mother worthy of the name does not feel for him and with him? A sword, it had been prophesied years before, would pierce her heart, and it was as though a sword was piercing her heart in that dark hour. The agony of Jesus was her own agony. She was undergoing a kind of crucifixion, not of the body but of the mind and spirit. She had hoped that He was the One to redeem Israel and her hopes had crashed and were in ruins. The Life that had begun with such magnificent promise was ebbing away before her very eyes. If a cry was on her lips it may well have been a cry of dereliction: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Him—and me?"

Writhing in torment on the cross, Jesus saw His mother. The tears in her eyes, the desolation on her face, cannot but have added to His sorrow. It is said that as death approaches, the whole of the dying person's past rises before

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him. When He saw His mother, did there flood upon Jesus the memories of Nazareth?—the home she had made for Him, the love she had lavished on Him, the solicitude with which she had followed every stage of His ministry? Did the past force on His mind the present and the future? What makes the parting of death anything but “sweet sorrow” is the thought of those who will be left behind. What will become of them? Who will tend and care for them? In the very act of redeeming the world, Jesus was mindful of His mother and made provision for her.

Standing alongside of Mary was her nephew, her Son's closest friend. To her Jesus said, “Woman, behold thy son!” and to him, “Behold thy mother!” From that hour, the record states, John took Mary into his own home. It may be that he persuaded her there and then to leave Golgotha and return to Jerusalem, and that he did so to spare her the ordeal of witnessing the end when it came. We do not know for certain, but if that was what happened, Mary and John would have gone from the scene before the air was rent with the cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” What we do know is that John believed Jesus had committed to him a sacred trust. He was to be a son to Mary, and she would be a mother to him. The New Testament is sparing in the matter of personal details, but tradition has it that they shared one home for twelve years, until Mary died, and that John would not leave Jerusalem, even for the purpose of preaching the gospel, as long as she was alive.

John was Mary's nephew. Why did Jesus not request that one of her own sons, one of His own brothers, James or Joses or Judas or Simon, should take care of her? The answer is supplied by a terse comment in the Bible—" . . . neither did his brethren believe on him" (John 7:5). "A prophet," Jesus had said, "is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house" (Matthew 13:57), and He spoke from firsthand experience. The members of His own family were not yet disciples; they had not accepted His claims or believed in His mission. John was chosen not so much because he was a kinsman but because he was an avowed and devoted disciple. In the Kingdom of God there are higher and more binding ties than those of family. Obedience to the will of God has priority over blood relationships. All of which brings to mind other sayings of Jesus stemming likewise from sad and bitter experience. "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: . . . but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household" (Matthew 10:34-36). And again: "He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37). So Jesus bequeathed the care of His mother to one who was in complete sympathy with Him and His mission, and though a few days later His brothers were found among the disciples and one of them, James,

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became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, Mary continued to share the home of the beloved disciple.

What then is the chief lesson to be learned from the third word from the cross? Mostly we think of the cross in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation and newly found sources of moral power. And we do so rightly, for behind all such thinking is not only the explicit teaching of the New Testament but the radiant, transformed lives of men and women in every Christian generation. The incident we have been considering, however, is the most striking reminder that the test of a noble life is that it does not, in its devotion to what is noble, neglect the responsibility that is near at hand. Here is the human touch, always characteristic of Jesus, and practical as well as human. *In the very act of redeeming the world He was not so absorbed as to be unmindful of His mother; He made loving provision for her.*

The application in our case is crystal-clear. If our work for humanity is known abroad but nothing of it is known at home, there is something very far wrong. The classical instance is described by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House*. The point of the book's title should not be lost on us. Mrs. Jellyby was devoted to an extensive variety of public projects, among them Borrioboola-Gha in Africa, and its natives, and the cultivation of the coffee berry, and settlement on the banks of African rivers of the superabundant British population. But Mrs. Jellyby's house was untidy and



dirty, her children were running wild, her husband would sit in a corner with his head against the wall, as though he were subject to low spirits. How one wishes that Mrs. Jellyby, so public spirited and well meaning, had pondered what was said by Jesus to Mary and John. Had she pondered it, would she have grasped its message for her? The cross has not only profound theological implications but intensely practical ones. Christianity, and fidelity to it, should carry us in thought and service far afield. It ought never to result in our overlooking or neglecting the true claims of home and family.



THE **4<sup>th</sup>** WORD

*My God, my God,  
why hast thou forsaken me?*

MARK 15:34

THE 4<sup>th</sup> WORD

J. B. Phillips

LET US, WITH THE UTMOST REVERENCE, USE OUR IMAGINATIONS for a few moments. Let us see, in our mind's eye, the hill of Golgotha.

The cries of mockery, the jeers and taunts had long since died away. The fearful heat, which had beaten upon the prisoners pitilessly exposed in their agony, had given place at noon to a sudden chill. For three long hours a strange darkness had covered the countryside. The birds, in this false night, had fallen silent. Many of the onlookers had drawn their cloaks around them in the growing cold and drifted quietly back to Jerusalem.

It was an eerie scene. Apart from the Roman guard, very few of either friends or foes of the figure on the central cross still remained. The centurion thought that he had noticed a few of the Man's followers stealing back to watch from a safe distance. His own men were restive. They were rough soldiers and, like most rough and tough men, intensely superstitious. They muttered to whatever gods or goddesses they believed in as they shifted uneasily from one foot to another.

The centurion felt a growing conviction that this Man on the middle cross was being unjustly, as well as cruelly,

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executed. No one is put in charge of a hundred men in the Roman Imperial Army unless he is a shrewd judge of men. The other two poor wretches on their crosses were ordinary highway robbers who would slit your throat as readily as they would slit your purse. They had only gotten their deserts. But this Man—a truly good Man if ever he saw one—in the name of all that is just and decent never deserves a death like this. Perhaps this darkness is a sign of the wrath of whatever gods there are. The centurion remembered old campaigners of the regiment, who had traveled widely over the vast empire, telling him of similar times when the sun grew dark in the daytime. Always, they had told him, the natives had gone nearly crazy because they thought they had mortally offended the gods and that the end of the world had come. But this was none of his business, he reminded himself. His job was to see that the prisoners died, and that no man rescued them. From time to time he spoke sharply to his men, reminding them to keep alert. It was just possible that the followers of this young Preacher might seize the opportunity of darkness for a desperate attempt to rescue the man Jesus, although by now He must certainly be almost dead. And then the centurion remembered those followers, and his soldierly lip curled in contempt. For in the end, when this Man needed them most, they had all fled like the cowards they were.

After three hours of this uncanny darkness the silence was almost complete. At first the jeers and abuse from the

bystanders had risen even above the dreadful screams and curses of the agonized thieves. But as time passed and the strength of the victims ebbed, their cries had died down to groans and whimpering. Now, apart from an occasional sighing moan, they hung there silently. The abuse of the bloodthirsty crowd aimed at the Man Jesus had died away completely. For one thing He had not answered them by so much as a word, and after a time even the most brutal men will grow tired of fruitless mockery. And then, when the darkness came, and they had made for home, some were even beating their breasts, as Jews were wont to do in times of sorrow. Perhaps there had been something in the dignity and bearing of the central figure which even transcended the humiliation of His stripped and beaten body, which had touched a heart here and there. When a human heart has raged and railed against a helpless victim, when the fury and the spleen are all spent, there will sometimes come a strange reaction. Perhaps, thought some of those who returned with bowed heads to their homes, it is we who have been shamed, perhaps it is we who are in the wrong.

The centurion glanced up at the three figures. The two thieves, he reflected grimly, are nearly out of it. All their cursing and blaspheming and writhing have exhausted them. But what of this Man in the middle? He has wasted no strength and, despite the dreadful flogging of a few hours ago, He has a strong body. He may linger until the last beastly business of breaking the legs has to be done. The

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centurion fervently hoped not. Brave men do not deserve to die like this, and once more the feeling came into his heart that this Man was both immensely brave and completely innocent. Perhaps He was even more than an ordinary man, perhaps a son of one of the gods.

This Man haunted the centurion. He had asked His God to forgive those who were doing this unspeakable thing to Him. He himself had not heard the actual words, but he had seen Him speaking, probably a few words of comfort, to one of the thieves, even though both of them had been hurling curses at Him a few minutes before. And it had been plain that the thief had received some kind of comfort even in his excruciating pain. And then there had been those words spoken to the woman who was still standing at the foot of the cross. The woman, he had been told, was the Man's mother. It was something about that young man who is with her now, looking after her and giving her a home. Probably the best He could do, thought the centurion. But, by all the gods, I have never seen anything like it. Pain of this kind usually brings out the worst in men. They usually curse and scream at friend and foe alike, as even a favorite dog will turn on his master with bared fangs if his pain is great enough. But not this Man. Even in this hell of torture He thinks of others. Once again the Roman had to take a firm hold on himself. A soldier has his duty to do; he is not paid to take sides, except in battle, and he must never allow himself the luxury of pity.



And now it seemed to the centurion that the great darkness was beginning to lift. He looked up at the face of the Man whose head was still crowned with those wicked spikes of thorn, and he looked hastily away. This was a young Man, but this face had borne every sorrow and pain since the world began. The eyes were open and looked heavenward. The dry, cracked lips moved pitifully, and then quite suddenly a great resounding shout came from that Man who had been silent for so long. "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" was the cry, and the Hebrew words echoed back from the rocks. This—perhaps the first admission of defeat, the first sign of the cracking of a human spirit—aroused the few cruel mockers who were still on the scene. Evidently they knew as little of the Hebrew tongue as the centurion himself. "Listen," they cried, "He's calling for Elijah! The poor chap's mind's going!" Some of them, moved at last by pity, ran to fetch a sponge and some sour wine and a stick so that they could reach up to moisten the parched lips. But the coarser spirits among them said, "No, let Him alone. Let's wait and see if Elijah really does come and rescue Him."

But there was, as we all know, no rescue. And those who loved Jesus, even those who watched Him from a safe distance, knew the meaning of this cry. It was part of a psalm which they had all known since childhood, and it meant "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

This was the scene. It may seem a strange moment to

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introduce the matter of translation and grammar, but I believe it to be of vital importance that we should understand the significance of the question which was shouted "in a great voice," at the end of three hours of darkness. For it is not to be interpreted as the cry of a Soul lost in the anguish of desolation. The Hebrew words were translated by Mark, or possibly first by Peter, into Greek, and in that language the use of the aorist tense carries naturally the force of "Why *didst* thou forsake me?" I am not a Hebrew scholar but I am told on excellent authority that such a translation is quite in accordance with the sense of the actual words which Jesus spoke. Therefore this strange cry may well have been one of unspeakable relief. The darkness and the desolation had been borne in silence but were now passing away. The dreadful spiritual agony, to which we must return in a moment, had been endured. That cup of suffering which the Son of God had feared and dreaded, and from which He had prayed so desperately to be delivered if it were possible, had now been drained to its last bitter drop. But the experience had been fearful, and the words which came to the mind of Jesus were this direct quotation from a familiar psalm. I believe there is no note of reproach or despair in them, only a shuddering relief as the darkness began to lift. "*My God, my God, why didst thou forsake me?*"

With the utmost reverence we must hear this cry again and try to answer its strange question. But, before we do

that, may I suggest to you how characteristic it was of Jesus to *ask a question*, even at such a time. All great personalities have their own peculiar traits, and the greatest of all human personalities was no exception. I wonder whether we have noticed how often Jesus used a question, where we might have expected a statement. The more we love and understand something of His mind the more we see the profound wisdom of His method. When Jesus was asked a question, again and again we find Him asking a counter-question, often a haunting as well as penetrating one, which does its own work as men try to answer it. A few, out of many, examples come quickly to mind. "*Why* are ye so fearful?" (Mark 4:40); He asked the terrified disciples in the storm-tossed fishing boat. And indeed why are you and I so often fearful? To answer that question properly takes us to the very roots of our beings, to the fundamental relationship between ourselves and God. On another occasion Jesus said to His enemies, "*Why* go ye about to kill me?" (John 7:19). We simply do not know whether His enemies were forced by that piercing question to examine their own hearts. We only know that the more vocal ones hotly protested that they had no murderous intent, even though in fact they did succeed in getting Him put to death. But (and this is a recorded fact which I have found many Christians have overlooked) we read in Acts 6:7 that ". . . a great company of the priests [in Jerusalem] were obedient to the faith." Surely it is highly probable that among them

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were men whose spirits had been stabbed broad awake by a simple question.

And then there comes into my mind that most remarkable question of all, spoken by Christ Himself, not now on earth but risen and ascended. It was spoken to Saul, the man who had wrought such cruel havoc on the men and women of the early church. What untold damage this one fanatical Pharisee had done! And yet he is brought up short on the road to Damascus, not by any word of condemnation or blame, but in a blinding moment of truth, by a simple question, "Saul, Saul, *why* do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4, rsv). When it struck the heart of one as fiercely honest with himself as Saul of Tarsus, the result was explosive.

I sometimes feel that when we are quiet before the living Christ, He meets us, sinners as we undoubtedly are, not with blame and reproach but with some penetrating question. We must never be so busy with our prayers and devotions that we drown out the voice of Jesus. Nor must we be so busy in our lives that we have no time to reply to what He is asking, or to let that reply influence our daily business of living.

So then, this same Jesus had and has a habit of asking questions, the right questions. We find Him as a boy of twelve, asking questions in the Temple; we find Him in His brief but crowded ministry, asking questions; and now we find Him, after the anguish, the loneliness and the despair, asking a question, "My God, my God, why didst thou for-

sake me?" Surely in the light of what we know of His habit of asking questions, it is neither irreverent nor outrageous to suggest that there was a purpose in asking this question too. Those who first heard it must have wondered how to answer it. And we, who are reverently watching the divine passion nearly two thousand years later, must surely make some attempt to answer it.

Well, let us be plain. Why *did* the Perfect Man experience not merely physical agony, but that far more deadly thing—the sense of having been deserted by the Father with whom He had enjoyed unbroken communion all His life? I think such answer as we can make must come along two lines.

First, I honestly believe that the Man who is our Example as well as our Saviour "... was in all points tempted like as we are ..." (Hebrews 4:15), but in this instance infinitely more severely. It was the last chance the principalities and powers from the headquarters of evil would ever have to attack the Son of God. The attacks of the Evil One are intermittent—even after the temptation in the wilderness there was a respite. But crowded into those three hours of darkness was such a concentrated assault of evil, such blackness of soul and sense of utter dereliction that even the Man who had lived His life in perfect faith and obedience cried out as He did when at last it was over.

Surely there is great comfort for us here. There are diseases of the body which produce depression of mind, a

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phenomenon which many of us have experienced briefly after recovering from influenza or some other virus infection. The color, the meaning and the point of life temporarily disappear. We pray apparently to an empty heaven, and in our misery we torture ourselves by brutal self-condemnation. Many of us, I repeat, know of these things briefly. But there are those who have to endure such conditions month after month, and even year after year. We who know something of God's love can truly help them by our love and our prayers. There is light at the end of their dark tunnel, and in the meantime we may help them far more by our encouragement than perhaps we know.

And of course our thoughts go out to those who are mentally ill. This sickness may be their own fault, or it may be, as far as we can tell, wholly undeserved—it certainly is not for us to judge. But these men and women are going through a hell of darkness and despair. Sometimes those of us who are not experts in the treatment of mental illness can do no more than stand by and pray. It is heartening to remember that such black depression, such utter desolation, fell upon the sinless Son of God. He who is now ascended up on high, taking our humanity with Him, as it were, can be relied upon not to have forgotten His own agony. In the popular phrase, "He knows what it's like." And we can pray for those who feel themselves cut off from God in the name of the Man who went through the same thing Himself.

But the second reason for this unique mental and spiritual agony goes deeper still. Some time before the crucifixion, John the Baptist, with that insight which is the stamp of every true prophet, had exclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Now I cannot pretend, even after many years in the ministry of the church, that I understand the mystery of atonement. I only know that the Representative Man deliberately allowed the forces of evil to close in upon Him and, in the end, to kill Him. Long ago the English hymnwriter, Cecil F. Alexander, wrote:

We may not know, we cannot tell,  
What pains He had to bear.

*Hymn, "There Is a Green Hill Far Away"*

I freely confess I do not know, I cannot tell. I only know that what you and I could never do was done for us, at infinite cost, upon the cross.

What dreadful truth lies behind the inspired words of Paul when he wrote, ". . . he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (II Corinthians 5:21)? It is a brutal statement, and on the face of it desperately unjust. Yet countless millions, down through the centuries and throughout the world, have found their relationship with God restored by accepting a sacrifice which they would always be powerless to make. Every time we come to Holy Com-

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munion we receive broken bread to represent His sorely wounded body, and poured-out wine to represent the blood which He shed. And this we are commanded to do until He comes again, lest we forget at what a cost the bridge between God and man was built and the reconciliation finally made.

To some this seems a monstrous, even an immoral doctrine. How, they ask, can we blithely accept the atoning action of Someone Else for sins for which we ourselves are responsible? Well, to be blunt, how else can we be "right with God"? If God has not made the reconciliation, who can? Every religion in the world that is worthy of serious consideration makes some attempt to remove this dreadful impasse. How can there be reconciliation between the utter perfection of God and the sins and guilt of mankind? A sort of indiscriminate celestial benevolence would no more solve the difficulty than the removal of a man's conscience would solve his own moral problems.

The humanists declare that we have to "learn to live with our sense of guilt" which shows at least an elementary appreciation of our plight. But the Good News says precisely the opposite; we can live *without* that sense of guilt! For that which we could never do has now been done, on the initiative and in the Person of God Himself. All over the world, in almost every country, men and women who have striven for years with a crippling sense of guilt have been able to leave their burden at the foot of the cross. This



can hardly be dismissed as some sort of mass deception. Ninety-nine per cent of those who thus accept their forgiveness are not theologians, and probably three quarters of them could never express in words any consistent theory of atonement. Countless thousands since Paul's day have found their peace in the "atoning work" of Christ. They can only be grateful, as he was, to ". . . the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

I am under no illusions about my inability to explain this marvel. We are in the presence of a very great mystery. What, for example, are we to make of Paul's astonishing statement that He (Jesus) ". . . should taste death for every man" (Hebrews 2:9), or that ". . . God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (II Corinthians 5:19)? Thousands of books have been written to explain the mystery, and I suppose I must have read hundreds of them. My appreciation of the costly act itself has grown with the years, but I cannot in all honesty say that I am much closer to understanding so perilous and costly a mystery.

The more I think of it, the more I allow my imagination to fill in the gaps in the terse gospel narratives, then the less I am surprised that ". . . from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour" (Matthew 27:45). God only knows what fearful battles were being grimly fought, or what agonies were being silently endured. I am only certain of this: the ordeal was endured, the battle was won, and through Christ we are free men who can ap-

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proach our Father with confidence. But sometimes my blood runs cold when I try to imagine what experience it was that wrung from Him the cry, even though it may have been a cry of relief, "My God, my God, why didst thou forsake me?"

THE **5<sup>th</sup>** WORD

*I thirst.*

JOHN 19:28

THE 5<sup>th</sup> WORD

## Chad Walsh

A MAN'S LAST WORDS MAY BE INCOHERENT NONSENSE, OR they may be the summing up and revelation of a whole life. The slowly dying hospital patient—fed intravenously and kept dully alive by drugs—is not likely to say anything that illuminates; in a sense, he has already died before the final apathy or incoherence overtakes him. But there are other deaths in which the one about to die faces the dark enemy with open eyes and clear mind.

Such was the death of Jesus. A Man perhaps in His middle thirties, at that age when body is still strong and intellect is mature and steady, He was condemned to a lingering death that slowly destroyed the body but left the mind and spirit unclouded. His last words were not the babbling of a drugged patient, but the words of a Man who recognized the death that was slowly clutching Him, and who found the time to say the final things that remained to be said.

It is no accident that Christian devotion has seized on "the seven last words" and evolved actions of meditation and worship around them. Jesus Christ comes to a focus in these words. Less than fifty words in all, the seven utterances of Jesus from the cross reveal what was of ultimate concern to Him. And when we know a man's ultimate concerns, we know *him*.

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The seven last words fall into several groups. First, there are those that were a continuation of His teaching ministry. When He was nailed to the cross, He looked at the soldiers performing the hateful task—and His imagination must have looked beyond them to the leading citizens and unthinking rabble that had combined against Him—and prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Evil as men can be, they do not knowingly nail God to a piece of wood. Spiritual blindness, as deep a night as the loss of physical sight, makes them reach for the hammer and nails. Jesus knew this. His ministry had always been one in which pardon was offered to harlot and Pharisee alike. In the final moment He prayed for forgiveness for the blind men who thought to glorify God by treating His Son like a runaway slave.

Thus the first “word” is nothing new, but a revelation of what Jesus had always taught and meant. Nor is there anything new when He says to the repentant thief, “To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” Again, it is the message of forgiveness—this time the certainty of salvation, rather than a prayer that blind eyes might be opened to the light of God’s saving love. Throughout the whole ministry of Jesus, there was a constant threat of teaching: a man’s damnation is the achievement of his own blindness and pride; the moment the ugly armor protecting his ego is cast off, God’s forgiveness enters and heals, and that is the moment of salvation.

When Jesus says, "Woman, behold thy son! . . . Behold thy mother!" He is simply doing His obvious duty as a good son. He is arranging a home for His mother. The gospel of Jesus Christ goes beyond the natural relationships of family and friends and master and servant, but it does not annul these relationships. A Christian is summoned to treat strangers as brothers and sisters, but he is not permitted to treat brothers and sisters and parents as strangers. The same Jesus who saved a wedding party from disaster is the One who at the final moment does the practical thing needed to put a roof over His mother's head and provide for her old age. Marriage, parenthood, the family—these are not the whole of the Christian life, but where they exist, they exist not to be neglected but to be hallowed; they become a large part of the concrete setting in which the Christian lives his faith. Christ came not to destroy the natural ties of men, but to reveal their real depth—rooted in God.

So far I have spoken of the utterances that show Christ in relation to other people. I come now to three "last words" that reveal Him in His lonely awareness of God. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"—an echo from the Twenty-second Psalm—is the most mysterious of the outcries from the cross. Perhaps He was reciting the psalm as comfort in the last moments; it is a psalm that begins in despair and ends with a soaring affirmation of God's victory and salvation. Or perhaps—since it was necessary that

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Christ plunge to the depths of human darkness in order to be fully one of us—there came a moment when God's reality seemed to fade away like a bright dream, and Jesus was alone in the ultimate solitude of a cross and a world from which God had departed.

When He said, "It is finished," He meant the three hours on the cross, but surely He meant more than that. The crucifixion was not an accidental thing. Figuratively speaking, the cross was made of the wood of that fruit tree which first tempted Eve and Adam. The cross is what men, rebellious against God, do to God when He comes to live among them. Christ Himself knew this. The cross was no surprise to Him. His whole life pointed toward it—and beyond it. Thus, when He said, "It is finished," He was saying, "The job is done," "The mission is accomplished." The cross was not the negation of His ministry but its seal and affirmation. Henceforth, the bridge uniting man and God was to be shaped like a cross.

Finally, "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" shows again the solitary Christ in relation to God His Father. He had been a Man under orders during His whole life; at the last moment He turned to God, entrusting Himself to the hands that had never failed Him. The job was done, the mission accomplished; all that remained was to offer the work and Himself to the God who had been His Guide and Companion.

The six "last words" that I have so far mentioned thus



come in two groups of three each: three that concern Christ and other people, three that center on Christ and God. In short, each expresses a particular relationship. But there remains the "last word" that is traditionally put in fifth place: "I thirst." At first glance, it stands out oddly. There is something crude about it, almost vulgar. It is not concerned with Christ's relationship toward others or toward God. The relationship is now Christ with Himself, or Christ with His own body. If at any time He uttered a purely selfish pair of words on the cross, here they are: *I thirst*.

Of course, if one insists, the words can be allegorized into something other than their plain meaning. In His teachings Christ Himself had used "thirst" as a symbol for spiritual longing, the desire for salvation. Perhaps on the cross the simple words have a metaphorical meaning—"I yearn for God" or "I long for heaven."

Perhaps. But let me suggest to you with all possible earnestness that we should not be too quick and eager to find a "spiritual" meaning in the two curt words. It is dangerous for a Christian to become too spiritual; he may end up by being more spiritual than the Son of God. He may in fact become as spiritual as the devil himself, who is a bodiless being and free from the limitations—and possibilities—of an earthly body weighing, say, one hundred and ten or one hundred and seventy pounds.

False spirituality gets between us and Christ more easily than earthly crudeness. In our heart of hearts, we do not

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want to believe that He was *fully incarnate*. We prefer to think of Him as God at a masquerade ball; God condescending to go through the motions of being man, so as to put us at our ease; but God still immune to the common trials and torments of mankind. In fact, God wearing a human mask which He can put aside when it grows wearisome.

But the Christian affirmation is totally different from this. It agrees that this was God—the eternal Second Person of the trinity. It says that the eternal Christ, fellow of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit in the mystery of the trinity, is the same Christ who was born as a little baby, nursed at His mother's breasts like any other baby, had the hiccoughs like other babies, was weaned and probably spanked, learned to talk and walk and read and write. This same Christ had the nervous system of you and me—the same nerves that can make of the human body a pleasure palace or a torture chamber. When He walked a long distance, He was tired; when He had nothing to eat, He was hungry; when nails were driven into His hands and feet, they hurt, and the wounds bled.

Jesus Christ was not God in a human mask, but God made man. He was as fully man as He was fully God. He is at one and the same moment the clearest revelation of God, and the only complete revelation of what a man is meant to be. And what a man is meant to be is a thing of flesh and blood and bone and central nervous system, as well as eternal spirit. We are what God made us. He made us hybrids, not angels.

Why then do we hesitate to take the words "I thirst" at their simple face value? Isn't it for the same reason that a great deal of religious art—think of the Sunday school leaflets of your youth—show Christ as a pale, almost effeminate young man, whose physical reality seems a temporary make-believe? Isn't it for the same reasons that our minds like to visualize the Sermon on the Mount, the resurrection, the ascension, but not the bloody events between the trial and the final three hours at the Place of a Skull?

It is pleasant to believe that God loves us enough to put on a human mask and come to our wedding feasts. It is not pleasant—it probes too painfully into our uneasy consciences—to believe God's love is so extreme and implacable that He was willing to be flogged with a cat-o'-nine-tails, spat on, cursed, nailed to a cross, and left to die of exposure, loss of blood, shock, thirst. This kind of God means business; He is not a God who comes to our special festivities as a surprise guest, but a God who is insistently beside us at all times, offering all—and demanding all.

When Archbishop William Temple said that Christianity is the most materialistic of all religions, he must have had something like this in mind. Compared to Buddhism or Platonic thought, Christianity is a crude and vulgar faith. It believes that being washed in water and eating bread and drinking wine are somehow a part of salvation. It takes a natural relationship like marriage and elevates it into a sacramental covenant. It says the physical universe is not a momentary illusion but the solid—and *good*—creation of a

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God who has given his particular globe to us as the theater in which the drama of our salvation can be worked out. Christ Himself, in His ethical teaching, says very little about delicate states of spiritual awareness, but very much about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked. When Oriental thinkers accuse the western world of being "materialistic" they are not always thinking of TV sets, oversized cars and thick beefsteaks. Our very religion is one that to the spiritual eyes of the east must seem preoccupied with grossly tangible, material things.

There is a great philosophical and spiritual watershed, depending on how one looks at the relation between spirit and matter. On the one hand, the material world can be viewed as an illusion or a prison house, temporarily caging the immortal spirit. In that case, the object of the religious life is to lose the illusion or to break out of jail. The other way of viewing the reality of the material world is to rejoice, to say that this is the way God made things and what God made is good. Both the Jewish religion and Christianity at its truest take this second path. If I weigh 170 pounds and have the body of an animal, a body that will age and die, this is not in itself evil. I am to confront God as a hybrid of body and spirit. If I am saved, I am saved in my totality, the spirit wed to the animal. Something of this sort is confirmed by the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Even in heaven, we are not permitted to be pure spirits. Our physical reality—transformed, no doubt,

beyond our imagining, and made appropriate to the new realm of existence—is still ours.

The possession of a body means that you are hostage to every kind of cruel chance. Tyrants may torment you in the torture chamber; cancer may strike; the body with its limited strength may put bounds to the work that the spirit can accomplish; the body with its animal desires may get out of hand and come into frontal conflict with the goals of the spirit. It would be much simpler if you were unalloyed spirit. In that case, you would never say—as Christ said—“I thirst.” But it simply happens that this is not the way God chose to construct you. Angels are perhaps pure spirit. You are not. Evidently it seemed to God—and who are you to argue with Him?—that it was best for you to be a working partnership of body and spirit.

If the body is a limiting factor upon the spirit, and at times its sullen enemy, it is also a check on the spirit when the latter turns bad. The devil, as I have said, is presumably all spirit; the story has it that he is an angel who went bad. Spirit, when it turns bad, can be completely bad. It can be bad with one hundred per cent efficiency. A human being cannot. The worst tyrant, the most dreadful human monster, driven by a fanatic and perverted ideology, still has to take time out to eat and sleep. He cannot do evil twenty-four hours a day. He must often fall asleep, desperately reviewing the evil plans he has not had the energy to carry out. And the built-in urges of his body may sometimes save him

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from the worst desires of his twisted spirit. The director of the extermination camp may fall in love and be diverted from his primary task. Or a bottle of whiskey may divert him. Thus Brother Ass, as St. Francis affectionately called his faithful body, puts as many limits on evil as on untiring good. If it keeps us from being as gods, it also prevents us from being completely successful devils.

I think I know what you are thinking. It seems to you that I have wandered farther and farther away from the simple words of Christ, "I thirst." I don't think I have. Those words open up vistas of understanding. They are first of all the simple assurance that God was not playing a game with us when Christ came. Christ was God fully entering into the human condition and paying the price of that condition. God was not like some wealthy visitor from the right side of the tracks who schedules a brief tour through the slums to distribute Christmas baskets. He made His home in the slums and endured everything—the inadequate food, the dirt, the bugs, the daily humiliations that the poor suffer. This is part of what was implied when Christ said, "I thirst." It was the sign and seal of a genuine *incarnation*. This Jesus Christ is very God, become very Man.

But the words "I thirst" point beyond this. They point to the whole Christian understanding of man in relation to man. We do not come to know one another as pure spirits. The most profound relationship that a man and woman can have is also the most physical thing conceivable. When

friends meet together they shake hands, they share food and drink. When you remember someone you know, his physical appearance is inseparably merged in your mind with the intangible memory of his character and personality. If you have ever had the experience of meeting someone for the first time over the telephone, you only half knew him until later when your physical eyes had looked at his physical face. God has so constructed us that our knowledge of each other is as much a thing of sight, hearing and touch, as of a spiritual or psychological "sixth sense."

If our knowledge of one another is of this sort, it is equally true that the Christian life is of the same hybrid sort. I grant that certain Christians are peculiarly called to a spiritual concentration and specialization—to a secluded life of incessant prayer and worship. There is a diversity of gifts. But the ordinary and right road for most Christians is the familiar one—to live in the combined world of spirit and matter, and to make no sharp distinction between the physical and the spiritual needs of themselves and others. Those missionaries who have preached sermons on Sunday and built hospitals and introduced new agricultural methods on Monday have grasped the meaning of this. Obedient to the Christ who was a hybrid of body and spirit like us, they have tried to serve the total needs of each man.

I must revert to a point I tried to make a few minutes ago—that Christianity is really quite crude and vulgar. The Christian way of life leads a man to solitary prayer, granted,

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and to that corporate prayer that we call worship; but it leads him just as surely to do something about the slums five blocks away or the famine five thousand miles across the sea. It gives him an uneasy conscience when elderly people must choose between bankruptcy, a pauper's oath, or inadequate medical care. It makes him see in any hungry child's face the face of a starving Jesus.

A very large part of the Christian life is therefore concerned with the simplest, most down-to-earth things. No one Christian can do everything, but the Christian world as a whole is judged, and rightly judged, by the tangible fruits of its faith. Outsiders ask: Are Christians doing anything so that the poor will eat more? So that everyone will have the medical care he needs? So that all will be educated? So that racial segregation in the south and residential restrictions in the north will cease to separate men? So that the world as a whole will not be hopelessly divided into those who go to sleep with a full stomach and those who take hunger to bed with them? So that the ultimate enemy of matter, the hydrogen bomb, will not destroy the bodies that God Himself created?

The Christian life is a sacramental one. By this I do not mean that the Christian spends all his time meditating upon the two or seven sacraments. I mean that in the traditional sacraments the Christian finds the luminous clue to the Kingdom of God. When he eats, or when he makes it possible for others to eat, it is an echo of that Last Supper



and its constant re-enactment in the sacrament of Holy Communion. When he does anything to keep his own body well or to heal others, it is as though the healing touch of Christ Himself were all but visible. When he votes money to build schools, he is giving sight to the blind and ears to the deaf. In all these things he is carrying on the work of the supreme Sacrament, Jesus Christ, who took the most ordinary realities of everyday life and showed how they could be channels of the spirit. The final goal—and perhaps this would be the Kingdom of God—is a world in which everything and every relation is a sacramental hint and reflection of the God who made all things, and made them good.

But all this does not exhaust the meaning of “I thirst.” I have been speaking about God, Christ, man and mankind. What of that part of the material universe that is not man—what of animals and trees and stones and topsoil and rivers and oceans?

This is a planet that God has given us in trust. Man has “dominion” over it. But this is a delegated dominion, not outright ownership. This dominion carries special responsibilities. The good master is not the ruthless exploiter, but the man who knows the nature of what he holds in trust: he loves it, respects it. The get-rich-quick lumberman who denudes a whole mountainside and leaves it to erosion is the threefold enemy of God, nature and his fellow men. The legislator who listens to the billboard lobby and refuses

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to ban enormous signs along the most beautiful highways is laughing in Christ's face. The man who needlessly pollutes rivers or plants crops where only grass should grow is a callous steward of the trust he has received from God.

This planet is a you-do-it kit straight from the hands of God. But to use it rightly we must understand it. Nature has her own laws; we can cooperate with them, or defy them at our peril. Nature is a good friend when you love her and appreciate her mode of existence; she is a stubborn enemy when abused and misused. The good steward is the one who studies nature and loves his way into an understanding of her, so the two can work together. The good steward is also the man who sees the future as vividly as the present: who knows that the men and women of the twenty-fifth century will need natural resources and beauty. To rob the future is as contrary to God's will as to rob the visible people you meet on the street. We are all trustees in a double sense—trustees of the physical planet, obligated always to learn its laws and adapt ourselves to them—and trustees for the babies who will be born when this green planet has forgotten our passing names.

All of this means that work is near the center of the Christian life. It is not merely a brutal, practical necessity forced upon the individual for his survival. It is a means by which he can be faithful to his multiple stewardship—his obligations to the natural world, to his present neighbors, to those unseen fellow pilgrims who will one day bless or

curse him; and his obligations to the Lord who appointed him a steward.

To put it another way, the full meaning of "I thirst" underlines the fact that the Christian life is not a special compartment in the day's twenty-four hours. One does not set aside a special hour a day to be a Christian. The Christian's job is not mainly to do special and queer things, but to do much the same things as everyone else, and to do them with a particular goal and in a special spirit. A Christian or an atheist plows a field or washes dishes in much the same manner. But if there is a difference, it is that the Christian ought to do the work as part of his stewardship; he works in loving relationship to God, his fellows and the planet on which we live.

Thank God that we worship a God who became Man. Thank God that this Man could say, "I thirst." These two words are our final assurance that He was—and is—one of us. He fully entered into our condition. He is no stranger. He is linked to us by inseparable bonds of both spirit and body. Thank God that Christ taught us a faith true to our double nature as spirits married to bodies. He does not call upon us to deny our animal reality. He asks only that we let Him glorify it, by sacramentalizing it, so that food and drink and the love of man and wife all become effective tokens of God's reality, and acts of thanksgiving to the God who made us thus. Thank God that we are not called upon to flee the world, but to love it, to work in it, to find in it

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everywhere—in trees and in faces—the half-hidden signature of God. Thank God that He has prepared an eternity for us in which the very bodies we now have are caught up in His glory, transmuted and made fit for His everlasting presence.

But most of all, thank God that His love carried Him to the ultimate extremes—the scourge, the nails, the cross. Thank God that God thirsts for us.

THE *6<sup>th</sup>* WORD

*It is finished.*

JOHN 19:30

THE 6<sup>th</sup> WORD

Paul Scherer

IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE KING JAMES VERSION THERE IS A startling and quite unforgettable contrast, often remarked in days gone by, between the sixth word of Jesus and the words of Elijah the prophet when he came out so despondently on the great southern desert in his flight from the enraged queen of Israel. He had been the instrument of God's judgment on that northern kingdom. The seal of the Almighty had been on the work of his hands. He had found the nation sunk in idolatry, and by a majestic tour de force seemed to be in the way of bringing it back to its ancient allegiance when suddenly the victory, just within reach, slipped through his fingers, or so he thought. Ahab's heathen wife, Jezebel, laid her plans for vengeance, and the prophet fled far down into the wild and desolate country that looked toward Egypt. He was sure that God's whole purpose had miscarried with his own lonely failure, and he asked to die. The cup was full. Everything had gone wrong. "It is enough," he said—in our own modern phrase, "I've had it!"—"now, O Lord, take away my life . . ." (I Kings 19:4).

Here, in the fourth gospel, where the evangelist is telling the story of the passion, we are concerned with Another who, nearly a thousand years later, had borne an even

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higher commission down the Galilean roads: spotless, so that none could bring accusation against Him; so kind that the most pathetic commentary ever written on human life is the long roster of His enemies; beginning in hope, but from the very beginning narrowing down toward defeat, until at last He came out on a hill of public execution where He wasn't even allowed to die in solitary state, but was mingled with the troubled goings of two thieves, undistinguished and obscure. The setting is just right for Elijah's poignant word again. If ever a man had cause to bow his head and say, "It is enough, now, O Lord, take away my life," this is the Man. And what do we get? We get something that must have been little more than a whisper; but you can almost hear the shout back of it, under it, everywhere around it: "It is finished." Nothing has gone wrong. Something has gone right—eternally right! He has drained a cup to its dregs, and He hurls it from him. He is not stumbling away into death. He is climbing into it!

There are a great many perplexities about the Christian religion, but this is the central perplexity. People sometimes talk of the cross with a kind of matter-of-fact assurance, as if it were no more than a tragic and unavoidable incident in the history of mankind. They say it was no other than the perfectly normal result of a perfectly normal situation. Jesus had set Himself against the drift in Palestine, and so had stirred into tumult the hostile forces that are always lurking—now and then they may be half asleep—below the surface



of life. Of these He was the victim in A.D. 30 or thereabout, as Socrates was four centuries before, and John Hus fourteen centuries later.

The trouble with the explanation is that it by no means covers the facts. No such ado as this has ever been made about the potion in Athens or the fires in Constance—they are the tragic and unavoidable incidents. Calvary has not behaved like an incident. It has behaved like a great deal more. It has behaved like God's answer to the riddle of human existence, as multitudes that no man can number have come to see in that face—God's face, with the lined and age-old compassion in it—and have been willing to write, under all the turbulent centuries and over the dark future, what has to be written: God—is love; with never a thought of defining God, intent only on allowing Him now to define love! You cannot march up to any of it any more with your measuring line, and lay it out this way and that.

You are bewildered by the note of completion which stands so persistently at the heart of the crucifixion. Something has been wrought out to the end, with nothing left beyond that anybody on this earth can add to it. Not many men feel that their work is done when death comes to them. When it comes to a man of thirty, we speak of his being cut off at the very threshold, with the best part of his life before him, everything to live for, his possibilities all unfathomed, his hopes unrealized. And here is a Galilean on

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His untimely gallows whispering with His last breath that His task is done. Nobody ever had any greater zest for life than He had. Nobody ever had any keener realization of what could be accomplished by living. It had been, perhaps, a matter of only months, three years at most, that He had spent trying to do what He had been sent to do. Hounded from countryside to countryside, He had tried to train a handful of followers to carry on His work, that it might not be wiped out, that there might be some kind of future for it; but of them one had betrayed Him, another had denied Him, none had understood Him, and all had fled. Then this: "It is finished." Who in the world could think that it had even begun? Elijah was through; in his own way he was sure of it, and was ready to quit. Jesus had barely made a start when in a sense He had to quit. But He knew quite well, and with what a world of difference, that He was through, and had come out on the other side. He said it in so many words. Significantly enough, it seems to me, what the other evangelists remembered at the end was "a loud voice." You wonder how He could have summoned enough strength after six hours, spread-eagled like that under the Syrian sky. I can only hope it was loud enough for us here not to miss it.

A good many of us still seem to keep listening in the dark without ever hearing the voice. The Middle Ages came very near smothering it. Not too very long afterward the church began picturing the crucifixion as a barbarous and ghastly

thing, which of course it was, and stopped there, with no hint of victory in the limp, wan figures it carved out of wood and hung over its altars, or painted with gloomy colors for the wall of some chapel or monastery: nothing in them but pathos and defeat, a poor life blown about like a torn scrap of paper in the wind and placarded against a cross. And it's true: that's what happened. But it isn't the whole truth. It isn't even the important half of the truth. Go back to the earlier Christian art and you'll see a crowned King on the cross! One who is fighting His last battle, and driving the enemy in front of Him. His head isn't bowed to a tempest He can't withstand. He isn't a man resigned to some bleak and inscrutable providence which has overtaken him. He is a Man who is changing the whole face of the earth. It was He, says Paul, who struck those dreadful blows with a hammer, blotting out the handwriting that was against us, taking it out of the way, nailing down sin and death, making a spectacle of them, right out in public, showing them up. It isn't a rout, it's a conquest. It's more than just enough. It's finished, rounded off, quite perfect! If that is victory—then in God's name what is failure?

I say you are bewildered by the note of completion that keeps sounding at the heart of the crucifixion. And you are bewildered by the sense of quiet, outrageous confidence that pervades it: looking forward through the years with such humble assurance to the issue of it. Wherever Jesus had moved that day, there was the only peace you could

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have found. There was none for Pilate. He came in and went out, sat down, stood up, asked questions, gave judgments, went back on them, like a man possessed. He gave it all up, washed his hands, and stalked off behind the doors of his palace, those incredible words pursuing him, as if they had been the very furies themselves: "Thou sayest that I am a king" (John 18:37); "... if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight. . . . Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above . . ." (John 18:36-John 19:11). Every step Jesus takes is a step that no one forces on Him; He takes it Himself. The stalwart executioners are forgiven. A thief is made a royal promise. A sorrowing mother is given over into the tender hands of a disciple. As the hours drag by from twelve to three He cries out into the darkness the first verse of the Twenty-second Psalm. You should read it with Matthew's account. "All they that see me laugh me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him. . . . they pierced my hands and my feet. . . . They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture" (Psalm 22:7-8, 16, 18). The whole thing ran so aptly with what was going on that He could hardly have helped thinking of it. Then those verses in the psalm that followed from the long past of Israel: always I have thought we could never probe the mystery of the cross without them. Jesus

knew what they were, marching up through the psalmist's own childhood at first: ". . . thou art he that took me out of the womb: thou didst make me hope when I was upon my mother's breasts" (v. 9). After that, straining forward eagerly through the gathering dark: "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord: . . . For the kingdom is the Lord's: and he is the governor among the nations" (vv. 27-28). Call it desolation, but don't call it despair. It's the even steadiness of an unshaken faith in the eternal counsels of God making its way through the storm toward the sure and restful sigh of a tired child: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit."

That's what staggers me about it: not the vast dominion of sin—we are familiar enough with that, or ought to be—but the vaster dimension of this other thing that talks of victory as it looks back and seems to have no misgiving at all as it closes its eyes on the future. Why didn't the cross seem to Jesus a black line drawn through everything He had said would be? "Blessed are the poor in spirit"—Jesus bearing His cross went forth. Canceled! "Blessed are the meek"—they came to a place called Golgotha. Canceled! "Blessed are the merciful"—there they crucified Him. Canceled! A thousand times over, life reads like that, with its dim twilights of daily defeated lives, baffled kindness, betrayed decency left holding the bag! The world is full of people who will smite you on the other cheek when you turn it, and make you go the third mile when you've already

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gone the second. Maybe Calvary meant that Christ and His sort would always be so utterly wide of the mark, so absolutely beside the point, that they were bound to come out through all the ages at the little end of everything, and be wiped clean off the slate at last. Why was this Carpenter from Nazareth so sure it didn't mean that and never would? That He could afford to lose, and still win forever? The fourth gospel is under the spell of that certainty from beginning to end. The colossal "No" that men tried to write over and over again was God's everlasting "Yes." I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). There is a passage in Luke which wants to define it as the meaning of history: "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?" (24:26). Dr. Arthur John Gossip, the great Scottish preacher, tells of the romance in which George Moore imagines a meeting between Paul and some "frail, almost speechless ghost" of a hermit far away in the desert. It was the Nazarene. His disciples had taken Him down from the cross, revived Him, spirited Him off, hidden Him in the wilderness. What a splendid fiasco it would have been! "Giving thanks unto the Father, . . . Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Colossians 1:12-13). Anatole France, if I remember rightly, has a legend that runs very much to the same pattern. Don't you see? That would have been a resounding "No!" The death of Jesus on Golgotha was God's own intrepid "Yes"—and the life that sprang out of it.

There it is then. I began by calling the crucifixion the central perplexity of the Christian religion. The note of completion you dare not miss at the heart of it, and the sense of quiet confidence that runs through all of it—both are bewildering. But listen now to what they keep saying.

They want us to know that against the background of unerring judgment stands today the sure mercy of God. That's why, in a world where death is common, this Man's death towers into a refuge. According to Shakespeare, all our yesterdays are but candles that light our way to dusty death and the grinning skull of poor Yorick. In the New Testament, there is one death which is the tautness of God's face as He stares down into the abyss that makes the busy traffic of our days sound so hollow even in our ears: the tortured knowledge of God standing on the brink of His own appalling leap to get under the farthest estate to which any soul has ever fallen, as the eagle was said to dart with the swiftness of the wind to spread her wings beneath her fledgling when it dropped. The burden was not light. The lift wasn't easy. You know, in all the piled-up anguish of the world, how heavy it was, this caustic, mordant mystery of human sin—never mind our endless and frantic attempts to gloss it over. With God there, where it was heaviest and worst, not to do away with it, but to do with it what only He could do! So that men ever since have come down from that place, looking at the world, and looking at their own soiled lives, as long ago a leper looked at his hands when Jesus had passed by, and the firm, pink flesh was back

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again, whispering "Clean! Clean!" And that isn't a doctrine which tells us what to think if we want to be admitted into church membership: it's a doctrine that tells us as simply as it can of an experience life has had, and points out that in the history of the Christian faith the cross has always somehow been at the center of it. That much was "finished" when Jesus died.

It was something of a shock to me when one day I discovered that John Newton, author of "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," "Come, My Soul, Thy Suit Prepare," "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," had run a slave ship; but so he most certainly did. And what was worse, it was his habit to read the liturgy on deck at matins and evensong, amid the moans and stench of a doomed humanity boiling up out of the hold. It seemed utterly incredible, intolerable; I didn't want to live with it. So I turned to the story of Newton's life, hoping there were other things about him that might be set down, and I came on the pitiful account of his later struggle to be rid of that vicious self which he had learned increasingly to hate. It was twenty years after he had become a minister of the Church of England that he wrote his hymns; and finally, too, his own epitaph:

John Newton, Clerk,  
Once an Infidel and Libertine,  
A servant of slaves in Africa,  
Was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour



Jesus Christ  
Preserved, Restored, Pardoned,  
And appointed to preach the Faith  
He had long labored to destroy.

Against the background of eternal judgment are the sure mercies of God! That much was "finished." It had been written in the Old Testament. It was more than written now: it was a Word made Flesh. Nails were driven through to clinch it. The past, the world's past, your past and mine would bear on it forever the mark of the Almighty—as the tax records of the little village of Domremy-la-Pucelle in the northeast of France, where Joan of Arc was born, have carried for centuries, so I have been told, the simple notation, "Remitted—for the Maid's sake."

But what of the days and years to come? Is there nothing to be said about them? I don't know, and neither do you, whether we are living through the decline and fall of a civilization, or the stormy dawn of a new era—perhaps both! I do know there is something about the world that makes me shudder, as if the black hosts of evil had been turned loose, inside and out. Camus has one of his characters look on at the agonizing death of a helpless child, while the doctors stand around unable to do anything about it, and he says "I'll never love any scheme of things which allows that." It's no answer—but I have tried saying it on Calvary, and it doesn't work! James Thomson, in his "City of Dreadful Night," was brooding over the whole monstrous riddle:

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I vow  
That not for all Thy power furled and unfurled,  
For all the temples to Thy glory built,  
Would I assume the ignominious guilt  
Of having made such men in such a world.

Paul wrestled with it. He saw the odds that stood against any future at all, scores of them: inside, a tedious, aching slavery, doing things still he didn't mean to do—God knew he didn't!—and wanting so much a better life than any he had ever seemed able to manage. You can see him there in the seventh chapter of Romans, his head on his arms: "O wretched man that I am!" (7:24). When all at once he looked up. What had happened didn't make sense that way! God in us at Bethlehem didn't. God for us on Calvary didn't. God with us at Easter didn't. God through us at Pentecost didn't. And hurriedly he wrote away at the eighth chapter. "For I am persuaded," the words come tumbling out, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

But then once more the clouds gather—outside this time. Paul isn't thinking of himself now, but of the Israel that he loves. He doesn't know what's going to become of his own people. What on earth is God aiming at in choosing them, then rejecting them, brushing them off? Back and forth he

struggles with it, trying to satisfy his mind about it, and he can't. So he lays down his logic and listens to what the cross is telling him. "What then? . . . I say . . . , Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles. . . . that through your mercy they also may obtain mercy" (Romans 11:7, 11, 31). Then he throws down his pen and sings a doxology. It's the only thing to do when once it comes to you that back of all the bewilderment which seems so sterile, God is weaving His own quiet pattern—never so silent as He seems, His love never so idle as you think! "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33). That, too, was "finished." It's as clear now as anything could be!

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God," mopping at his forehead, "that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God . . ." (12:1). Surely that had to be the upshot of it. There were no desperate situations any longer; there were only desperate men, and he was not of their number. The counsels of the eternal God were already cross-deep in the shadows. That much was "finished." The only thing that wasn't finished was what these Christians in Rome meant to do about it. I think we can hardly play it safe now. Christianity has so little to do with warming one's hands somewhere in the neighborhood of the First Psalm: "Blessed is the man that walketh

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not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. . . . he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, . . . whatsoever he doeth shall prosper" (v. 1, 3). We have to let that go. We have no Omnipotent Helper to run our errands of peace in a warring world, or to make Red China a little more like the United States. "There shall no evil befall thee . . ." (Psalm 91:10). We have something that was said in Gethsemane: ". . . not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42). We give back good for evil, but not to make the evil good. We do it because ". . . there is another king, one Jesus" (Acts 17:7). That's what Paul and Silas said at Thessalonica, and they turned the world upside down with it. We forgive seventy times seven, but not to gain a friend. We turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and the third, which is still harder—but not to influence anybody. We do it because we have crossed the frontier of a strange country, out of the peace of having what we want into the "no peace" where Christ is, and things are not all right, but we have caught the first real glimpse we have ever had of how wrong they are. God gives us there of His own cup to drink, His one supreme and final act of hospitality—our share of that reckless, bitter compassion which got itself scourged, and mocked, and spat on, and crowned with thorns, and crucified. It's strange beyond all telling, but that way lies the promise. On any other terms we are simply playing around with the gospel, and it will have nothing to say to us.

THE **7<sup>th</sup>** WORD

*Father, into thy hands  
I commend my spirit.*

LUKE 23:46

## Gerald Kennedy

ONE OF THE MOST DIFFICULT THINGS TO SAY IS WHAT WE know in the depths of our beings, but cannot put into words. It is easy enough to talk about the inconsequential, but when it comes to saying something important our words are poor, stumbling instruments. There was never a teacher to compare with Jesus in finding the stories, the comparisons, the figures of speech to flash light into the dark mysteries. We turn away from the philosophers and all the esoteric brethren to find our guidance in the words of the One who, as the officers of the priests and Pharisees reported: "No man ever spoke like this man!" (John 7:46, RSV).

Yet even His words are not entirely sufficient. The deeper truth is that He became the Word and it is His life that makes straight the crooked paths and gives us light enough to live by. We listen to His voice and we watch His actions for the essential clues to the meaning of life and God. Especially we enter into Holy Week to catch the final summing up of the last and awful days of our Lord. Rightly we feel that here are the great moments for Him and for us. How does He behave and what will He do now?

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His last words on the cross come from the Thirty-first Psalm, which is a great poem of trust and confidence. I have heard these words interpreted as a passive surrender and a sort of making the best out of a bad situation. Some commentators have said that Jesus was saying He had nothing to show for His life, but at least He could return His own spirit uncompromised to God. At best this word seems to such writers to be a brave and stoical affirmation.

But I do not believe this at all. I think these last words are a proclamation of victory. They say what He was affirming all His life—that God leads us to triumph when all the circumstances seem to deny it. The medieval crucifixes almost lost this meaning as they portrayed a passive, pain-drenched figure which seemed to glorify suffering as an end in itself. The earlier artists, closer to the event itself, showed a King on a cross, and strangely, ruling as He died. Nothing, not even the agony of crucifixion changed His witness to the love, concern and victory of God.

Now while I was pondering some of these things, I came across a striking phrase in a book on the parables.\* The author was talking about Jesus' teaching of the Kingdom of God and he said, "Jesus' concern is thus not with a human 'when' of the Kingdom's coming but with 'God's future' and man's destiny as a sharer in it. 'Unremarkable beginnings, unimaginable endings' might be a good sum-

\* Archibald Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).



mary." Let us look at this seventh and last word from the cross in the light of this insight.

◁ To begin with, we must confess that: *So far as beginnings are concerned, evil has all the best of it.* The evil things, or even just the worldly things, believe in getting off to a good start, which means a spectacular start. If they cannot begin well, their promoters are likely to lose heart right at the beginning.

From my hilltop in Hollywood, I can see a blaze of lights in the sky now and again when something important is taking place, such as the opening of a supermarket or the introduction of a new film. The world of commerce never hides its light under a bushel. But I was present at the organization of a new church some time ago, and the contrast was marked. We met in what had formerly been a cocktail lounge, now closed. There were about twenty-five persons present. The district superintendent presided and explained what the meeting was about, and without any compromise he described the burdens and responsibilities of being charter members of a new church. When the invitation was given to come forward and join, twelve people responded. Today, a few years later, that church is strong, vigorous, missionary-minded and youth-centered. But the beginning was not noticed by the press and no klieg lights illumined the sky.

My episcopal duties take me to Las Vegas from time to time and I am always impressed with that city at night. The

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Strip with its multimillion-dollar hotels is a blaze of spectacular neon signs. There is a block in downtown Las Vegas that is brighter than Broadway in New York City. Then on Sunday morning I go into the worship service of a church where everything seems so quiet in comparison. We sing the hymns, we hear the Scriptures read, we pray, a man preaches the Word of God. But if you are impressed with noise, movement, brilliance, you will prefer the shows and the gambling halls.

What a light there was when the atomic bomb was exploded over Hiroshima! It was to be the end of the war and the bringing of peace to the earth. But it brought a good deal more and if we could have foreseen the future, that Pandora's box would not have been opened. Even the militarists would have thought twice as they contemplated the darkness that would settle on civilization after that first brief, awful light. Sin always dazzles its victims at the beginning.

◁ Evil can promise an immediate reward. It says to the thief that there is no need to wait and earn the money. Take it now and enjoy it! It says to the betrayer that the cause is long and arduous while the enemy will pay well for selling out. The devil came to Jesus in the wilderness with three propositions. First, if He would turn stones into bread and feed the people, He would have a following immediately. Second, He might throw Himself from the pinnacles of the temple, and by this spectacular act the people would accept

Him as the Messiah. Third, He needed only to worship the devil and all the kingdoms of the world would be His. No need to follow the long road to the cross.

The promise of the demagogue is always in terms of an immediate reward. He will give the people their hearts' desires now if they give him their independence and sense of decency. And whenever an individual or a generation yields to such invitations, the reason can be summed up in these words: "I was tired of waiting." People want the rewards now and the future seems so long and so uncertain. The way of evil seems so direct and easy, while the way of goodness is difficult and hazardous.

Fred Allen once commented on an egotistical colleague. "The last time I saw him," Allen said, "he was walking down Lover's Lane holding his own hand." It is understandable that many of us love ourselves more than we love God and resolve to put all our energies into obtaining what we want now. It is hard to hear the voice of our Lord telling us that if we want to find our lives tomorrow, we must lose them today. We prefer Omar Khayyam's advice: "Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go. . . ."\*

But if the beginnings are spectacular and splendid, *the endings of evil are quite imaginable*. The decline sets in almost immediately. The horrid discovery by the sinner is that what starts so beautifully gets ugly so soon, and he awakens to the sad truth that the beginning is all there is to

\* *The Rubáiyát*, translated by Edward FitzGerald.

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it. Wrong strikes twelve immediately and everything from then on is anticlimax. Such a life goes through the boring agony of becoming duller and more wearisome with every passing year.

↳ It was Dorothy Parker, I believe, who once remarked that the trouble with the philosophy of "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die," is that tomorrow you do not die. Tomorrow you live in terms of the way you lived today. Tomorrow you reap what is sown today. Evil has within it an inner corruption that begins its work immediately. The great boredom finally takes over and a man comes to that hell on earth, which is a suspicion that his life is meaningless.↳

↳ In that popular musical comedy *My Fair Lady*, there is a song entitled: "With a Little Bit of Luck." It reflects a modern philosophy and it sums up the tragedy of many a life, for it suggests that if one does wrong, he may have a "little bit of luck" and he will not get caught. He may betray his vows, or steal, but if things break just right, he will get away with it. Yet even if in a particular instance a man succeeds in escaping detection and punishment, what is happening within him is the real punishment. For the deterioration of one's moral life and the betrayal of one's character are tragedies which are ultimate.↳

Here lies the anguish of all those who must watch the ones they love take the wrong turnings. The parents see a child choose bad companions and become fascinated by the

tawdry glitter of sophisticated living. They know where that road leads and the end is perfectly apparent. But no matter what they do, the child cannot be made to believe them or heed their warnings. Like the father of the Prodigal Son, parents must sometimes just wait and pray.

The teacher who takes his task as a high calling goes through this agonizing experience many times. Here is a boy who has gifts and is capable of making a great contribution to society. He falls into evil company, begins to admire the wrong people and is drawn toward the wrong values. It seems sometimes as though youngsters are for the time being hypnotized like a bird in the presence of a serpent. What can the teacher do but wait and pray for the right word which will restore sanity?

The prophets went through such experiences in trying to bring a generation to its moral senses and to recognize which way the drift was going. It was not only Jeremiah who was a weeping prophet: all of them wept in their hearts and Jesus wept over Jerusalem. The preacher speaks his word grounded in the conviction that wrong always has a bad ending, but he finds his people listening to the pleasant voices of the false pastors. It is a terrible thing to see the ending so clearly and yet to be unable to make the victims believe in the truth of your vision.

◁ A little boy noticed that his grandmother boiled the dishes after bringing them out of grandfather's room. He was intrigued and asked why. Because, she explained, grandfather

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was sick and the germs must be destroyed so that other members of the family would not get sick. The little boy pondered a moment and then asked brightly, "Wouldn't it be easier to just boil grandfather?"

And that is precisely what evil does to a person. There is no halfway business or partial damage of life. It is all destroyed once the germs are allowed entrance. Spectacular beginnings and tragic endings is the story of evil.

Turn now to the other side of the picture and note that *the beginnings of God's Kingdom are usually unremarkable*. Hardly ever do they arouse contemporary attention. Only when we look back do we see their promise.

We might consider Israel, who has given us our spiritual heritage and taught us the great lessons about God. There was nothing very hopeful in a body of slaves trying to find their way through a wilderness. After they found the promised land, they were never very powerful or important. They were free only because of the rivalry between the big empires to the north and south. They were, as Chesterton once remarked, an obscure tribe at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. It would seem that God might have chosen any number of peoples whose beginnings were more promising than Israel's. No wonder someone wrote:

How odd  
Of God  
To choose  
The Jews.

Or we may consider the church and its unremarkable beginnings. Today we observe Pentecost Sunday but Pentecost was not noticed by very many people at the time. None of the key members of the community were present and the chroniclers of the day made no mention of it. Pentecost was just a group of uneducated folks on an emotional jag and talking some absurd nonsense about a dead man coming to life.

Or we may look at the beginnings of America. It was not very auspicious when a few colonists declared their independence from the greatest empire of the day. If Lloyds of London had been functioning the premium guaranteeing the success of the venture would have been astronomical. We have come a long way after a most unremarkable beginning.

But we shall never find such an instance of this principle as the Incarnation. That God should come to us in a baby is amazing enough, but as a baby born of humble parents in such an out-of-the-way place is almost beyond our comprehension even after all these years. The whole life of Jesus is a complete contradiction of all our worldly wisdom and a complete denial of our ways. It is life grounded in such simple and complete trust in God that even today we cannot comprehend it fully. To give one's self to teach twelve men who never quite understood Him is startling enough, but in addition one of them betrayed Him and another denied Him publicly. What would ever be remem-

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bered about a Man who had not written a word nor won a single place of authority or recognition in the community?

This is what Paul called "the foolishness of God" (I Corinthians 1:25). You can hardly put it in any other way, for all of this is madness compared with our human wisdom. When He was on His way to Jerusalem and a Samaritan village refused to receive Him, James and John said, "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" (Luke 9:54). But He forbade it and simply went on the weary road to another village. He never seemed concerned to make the kind of impression that would impress people with His power.

It has been my privilege during the past decade to visit missions all over the world. I have found bright young couples with small children in a jungle village in Africa, or in a social settlement in Tokyo. I have met young men and women who are giving their lives to serve disinherited people in India and South America. I have appointed preachers to the Aleutian outposts and I have seen brave men filling lonely places in primitive cultures. What a small thing they seem to represent and what a hopeless situation they seem to face. But out of these unremarkable beginnings there come now and again the brilliant leaders, the dedicated teachers and the public servants of tomorrow. Like leaven, the missionary spirit spreads.

(My friend, the late Dr. W. E. Sangster of London, whose untimely death was such a loss to the church, once made a



trip around the world. When he returned he reported that he had seen no Atheist's Home for Orphans and no Agnostics Hospital for the Poor. But everywhere he found the Christian church at work caring for the needy and feeding the hungry. There seems to be something about the presence of this strange Man on the cross which removes all fear of small and unremarkable beginnings.

And now we come to the assurance God gives us through Christ of his *unimaginable endings*. Said the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead: "I hazard the prophecy that that religion will conquer which can render clear to popular understanding some eternal greatness incarnate in the passage of temporal fact." Well, here is a Man dying on a cross. There is a temporal fact for you. And He comes through the pain to the end with no bitter sense of futility but with a great cry of faith. There is your eternal greatness incarnated.

The Kingdom of God has both a temporal and an eternal dimension. It is now and it is tomorrow. It is progress and it is always the same. It is assurance and it is expectation, for when we are committed to God we are saved from trust in our own cleverness or in our own manipulations of influence. We are saved by faith in God.

The world soon loses its faith when it suffers. Let a man get a toothache in the middle of the night and he will be unusual if his philosophy does not go out the window. He wants only one thing—the alleviation of his pain. This is the

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test of our convictions and our commitments. It was the test of all that Jesus taught and in the days following the crucifixion, His disciples, when asked what was the guarantee of their faith and the earnest of their assurance, replied, "the cross." Not a crown, mind you, but the cross!

Surely this is a matchless miracle. Confidence comes to a person in some pleasant experiences and there are times when all of us have a great surge of well-being as we feel the love of God in our hearts. But confidence on the cross? That takes more believing than we could muster if we had not seen it and been probed by its power.

What an unimaginable ending! Paul found its wonder and power, and his writings abound with this marvel of God's love. "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified," was the way he put it (I Corinthians 2:2). Our hearts respond at Christmastime to the birth of One who was called Immanuel, which means "God with us." On Easter morning we shall proclaim that He is risen. But on Good Friday we feel our lives undergirded with the faith that nothing that life can do to us will ever be able to separate us from God in Christ. We cry out deep within our beings, "Father, into thy hands we commit our spirits."

Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick has reminded us that Franz Schubert wrote in the margin of one of his symphonies some directions for the conductor. In one place he wrote, "As loud as possible." Then a little later he directed, "Still

louder." But that is what the Christian finds God has done in Christ. We come to those great experiences which seem to be as great as we can possibly know. Then something happens which is even greater. We cannot think of anything more wonderful than these last words on the cross. But on Easter morning, it will be still greater. Unimaginable endings, indeed!



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

DR. JOHN SUTHERLAND BONNELL is Pastor Emeritus of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City . . . he has spent twenty-six years as pastor there, the second longest pastorate in the history of the church. . . . Canadian-born, he was a sergeant major of the 5th Canadian Siege Battery in World War I, and was wounded twice . . . got his education at Prince of Wales College and Dalhousie University, Pine Hill Divinity Hall in Halifax, and did post-graduate work at the University of London, England. . . . He served Presbyterian churches in St. Johns, New Brunswick, and in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada . . . had a weekly radio broadcast in New York for twenty years, and for twelve years was in charge of "National Vespers and Pilgrimage," on ABC . . . in 1960 conducted NBC's "National Radio Pulpit." . . . Has six honorary degrees from American and Canadian colleges . . . served as goodwill ambassador from American churches to British churches . . . was awarded The King's Medal for Service in the Cause of Freedom by King George VI . . . and has written ten books.

J. WALLACE HAMILTON holds a record remarkable among Methodists . . . he has been pastor of the same church (the

## HE SPEAKS FROM THE CROSS

Pasadena Community Church in St. Petersburg, Florida) for thirty-three years. . . . Came there when the church had only thirty-four members . . . now it has thousands. . . . A new sanctuary seats 2,200 people . . . the huge overflow sits in cars parked under palm trees outside, listening to the sermon over an amplifying system. . . . This drive-in church is one of the most famous and efficient churches in America . . . its pastor one of the finest preachers. . . . He preaches in Pasadena from October through May, then across the country, from coast to coast throughout the summer. . . . Born a Canadian, he is American by adoption, Christian by conviction, courageous by instinct, effective by dint of long labor in the school of hard knocks. . . . He has preached in the outstanding pulpits of the United States and might have any of them . . . but he insists upon staying with the congregation he loves, in a church "gone bust" after the Florida land boom and revived by their efforts and his into a future-minded church. . . . A "family" of 7,500 worships in the new \$750,000 sanctuary—2,200 sitting inside the church, 1,500 sitting on green benches outside, and anywhere from 1,500 to 2,500 cars. . . . He has written three books, and his fourth is soon to be published by Revell.

GERALD KENNEDY is probably the most popular bishop in the Methodist Church . . . certainly he is the widest-

known. . . . Has been president of the Council of Bishops (1960—1961) and has held other high directive offices in his church . . . is a member of the California Board of Education . . . teaches at Pacific School of Religion, has lectured at Nebraska Wesleyan University and at Southern California School of Theology. . . . Author of eighteen books . . . conducts one of the best fiction-review columns in the country . . . has written for magazines too numerous to mention . . . is distressed by second-rate performances and never gives one himself . . . is fascinated by sports cars, baseball and football and plays a good game of golf. . . . Holds a doctorate in philosophy from Hartford Theological Seminary, has four other earned degrees and ten honorary degrees. . . . Has pastored one Congregational and three Methodist churches. . . . Lectures widely in colleges and seminaries of several different denominations. . . . Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam says of him, "He is the most gifted churchman I know in speech, writing and reading. This man is different. He makes religion real."

ROBERT J. McCracken is Scottish by birth and American by choice and naturalization . . . educated at the Universities of Glasgow and Cambridge . . . holds thirteen honorary degrees from colleges in Scotland, Canada and the U. S. . . . Has ministered to churches in Edinburgh, Glasgow, and

## HE SPEAKS FROM THE CROSS

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. . . . Was professor and head of the department of Christian Theology and Philosophy of Religion at McMaster University in Hamilton when he was called to Riverside Church in New York City. . . . Teaches now as Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York. . . . Has written three books . . . served on numerous civic and church boards and committees. . . . Since 1948 he has served as special lecturer in theological seminaries from coast to coast . . . has found a widespread and enthusiastic audience as speaker on WOR's "Sunday Radio Chapel" and NBC's "National Radio Pulpit." . . . His preaching in Riverside Church pulpit has established him as one of the outstanding clergymen in this country, and abroad.

J. B. PHILLIPS is British, known and beloved throughout the Christian world. . . . When a member of a Youth Club in his bombed out South-East London Church told him the group could not understand the *New Testament Epistles*, he sat down and wrote a translation they *could* understand. . . . His *New Testament in Modern English* is a classic in modern religious literature. . . . He has been schoolteacher, journalist, preacher, lecturer . . . since 1955 he has been full-time author and preacher. . . . Was named a prebendary (canon) of Chichester Cathedral in the Church of England, but resigned to give more time to writing. . . . Heads a non-



profit company called Christian Communications, Limited, which supplies Christian literature to newly literate parts of the world . . . is currently working on a translation of the Old Testament. . . . Has sixteen books to his credit thus far . . . world sales exceed four million. . . . His hobbies include recording speech (he is a good radio engineer), painting, making the Scriptures understandable to keen modern minds, and loving everyone he meets. . . . As man and author he is quietly courageous . . . sample of his courage is his translation of John 1:1, "At the beginning, God expressed himself. . . ."

PAUL EHRLMAN SCHERER is a Pennsylvania-born Lutheran, who has been called the greatest preacher in America . . . he is certainly one of the most popular. . . . Spent twenty-five years as a pastor . . . fourteen years teaching homiletics at Union Theological Seminary . . . was Visiting Professor of Homiletics at Princeton (1961-62). . . . Educated at the College of Charleston (S. C.) and Lutheran Theological Seminary (Mt. Airy, Pa.) . . . has five honorary degrees . . . was radio preacher on "Sunday Vespers" national broadcast for thirteen years . . . was associate editor of *The Interpreter's Bible* and has written six books. . . . His lectureships include The Lyman Beecher, Perkins, Mullins and Jarrell Foundation Lectures. . . . Some call him a preacher's preacher, but the laymen buy his books. . . . With Ralph W.

## HE SPEAKS FROM THE CROSS

Sockman and Harry Emerson Fosdick, he consistently produces manuscripts that editors say they hate to touch—and hardly have to—before sending them off to the printer.

CHAD WALSH may be the most popular writer within the ranks of the Protestant Episcopal clergy. . . . Born a Virginian, he started writing in the fourth grade, wrote good poetry before he was out of grammar school . . . served a journalistic apprenticeship writing advertising for two Virginia newspapers owned by Sherwood Anderson. . . . Went to college at the University of Virginia, where he wrote more poetry and was interested in dramatics . . . did graduate work at the University of Michigan . . . served in the U. S. Army Signal Corps (1943—1945). . . . Was an agnostic in his youth, but came into the church and the Protestant Episcopal priesthood after being deeply influenced by the writings of Reinhold Neibuhr and T. S. Eliot. . . . Today is professor and chairman of the department of English at Beloit College in Wisconsin, and Associate Rector of St. Paul's Church in Beloit. . . . Author of a dozen books, much poetry and many articles in various American periodicals. . . . His first book was *Stop Looking and Listen*, which he describes as a recruiting pamphlet for Christianity . . . his latest is *From Utopia to Nightmare*, just published. . . . He averages a book a year, and none of them are average.









## THE CONTRIBUTORS

JOHN EDWARD BONNELL

Pastor Emeritus of New York City's  
First Presbyterian Church

J. WALLACE HAMILTON

Pastor of the Pasadena Community  
Church, St. Petersburg, Florida

GERALD KENNEDY

Bishop of the Los Angeles Area, The  
Methodist Church

ROBERT J. McCracken

Minister of The Riverside Church,  
New York City

J. B. PHILLIPS

Anglican clergyman and translator of  
Scripture

PAUL SCHERER

Professor of Homiletics, preacher and  
lecturer

CHAD WALSH

Professor and chairman of the Beloit  
College department of English, Beloit,  
Wisconsin

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